

ELECTRA MORDINSON IMPOSSIBLE YEAR



(CW: This is a book for trans people to read, and I have tried to keep the trauma to a minimum. We deal with enough sadness.

However, please be aware the major themes are:

sex, romance, genitals, HRT, surgery, dysphoria and the exhaustion of life. There is a chapter about scary situations and close calls while attempting to date cis men. There are also brief references to drugs, mental health issues, suicide, non-sexual assault, consensual choking and “the bathroom issue.”)

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PLAYLIST (important/recommended)

<http://spoti.fi/2DLASWI>

Dedicated to A., for saving my life.

*"In the velvet sensual darkness
on the harbour shore in Sydney,
I sometimes feel myself haunted
by a sense of loss,
as if time is passing
too fast."*

- Jan Morris, Sydney

PART ONE

Lazarus

One

Sexual Feeling

“If you really think about it, what’s so bad about a woman who can only do anal? You’d think more guys would be into that.”

I hit send and looked idly out the train window. Dead grass, occasional sheep. A solitary ‘56 pink Cadillac, appearing still as it kept tired pace with the train. ‘Conor’ wrote back straight away.

“u done it before?”

I smiled. So that line worked again. Hundreds of kilometres away from Sydney, I could feel him harden. Boys. I put my phone back in my pocket, letting him marinate.

My girlfriend was asleep in the seat next to me. She’s trans, like me. We also have the same first name: Olivia. I looked at her, asleep in that awful long-haul train position, leaning forward as if resigned. I could just read the bold yellow Nirvana font on the back of her shirt:

*DRESS WEARIN’
FEELS HAVIN’
ESTROGEN GUZZLIN’
TRANS LESBIAN
S L U T*

January 11th, 2016. We were coming home to Sydney from the Parkes Elvis Festival. I don’t know if you’ve heard of it. Every year around Elvis’ birthday, thousands of people descend on a small town in New South Wales to celebrate the life and work of a man who had nothing to do with the place.

You hear and see nothing but Elvis for days. The 'Elvis Express' train in both directions from Sydney has giant sunglasses and a wig mounted to the front. Hotels in this otherwise ordinary town book out years in advance, forcing many to set up tents in the caravan park. There's a sunrise "gospel service" in the Big W underground parking lot. There are plenty of bad impersonators but there are also incredibly good ones, professionals who look and sound exactly like him to the point where it's kind of scary. There's a parade that packs out the main street to the horizon; enough people to triple the town's population, all somehow united by Elvis and in cheap lycra jumpsuits, trying to pretend they're flourishing in the 40-degree heat.

It's a bizarre thing. A corny, hellish fever dream. Yet it's life-affirming, and I try to go when I can. It restores my faith in music and art. It reminds me that once you create things, you never know where they'll end up.

Olivia and I share a lot of music stuff, but not Elvis. She doesn't really get it. She tolerated Parkes on a sort of anthropological level, but I could tell the insanity of the whole spectacle gradually got under her skin. She was getting grumpy by day four, and when she gets grumpy, it tends to be pretty understated. Few others can even pick up on it. I can tell because she tolerates my quirks only slightly less.

That day on the train, I could still see the blooming scars under her piled-on eyeshadow, beneath her bent, glued-together Judee Sill glasses. A few days earlier, someone had clocked her in the face while she was in the middle of a panic attack during the New Year's Eve countdown. We never found out who it was. I guess they must have been tripping on something and startled by the noises she was making. This left her with scars that would maybe be permanent, faintly burning the shadow of her glasses frame into her skin. When the dust settled in the emergency room that night, I found the whole thing pretty funny. What a shit way to start the year.

Oh, and get this. That year's theme for the festival was *Fun in Acapulco*, the Elvis movie set in Mexico, the one with that "Bossa Nova Baby" song in it. I have this habit of obnoxiously pulling out aux cables to hijack the music at parties when I get drunk, and I chose "Bossa Nova Baby" just before midnight on New Years Eve. The party was in one of those stuffy, tense sharehouses, and the vibe was so "radical queer" that my drunken logic felt they needed to be put in their place, or something. So that was the song playing during her panic attack. I joked that it was also the reason someone hit her, that this harmlessly dated Elvis hit had somehow caused it, was some kind of curse.

She then had to hear "Bossa Nova Baby" over and over for the entire festival, just days later. It was playing in cafes, bars, from caravans, over the PA system in the main street. Again, I couldn't help but find this funny. She was so out of context in Parkes as it was. Her deadpan face, piercings, eyeliner and all, every time that damn song came on. I giggled every time. The poor thing. I really love her.

Parkes is an experience everyone should have at least once, but I was starting to think, as Elvis once sang, that “Once is Enough”. I was so exhausted. Straining my neck to glance over the train seat, I could still spot a few sombreros. *Christ, get over it*, I thought, before I locked my phone, put my head on Olivia’s shoulder and drifted off myself.

“I Need Somebody to Lean On” ran through my head. I really like that song. One of the loveliest things Elvis ever recorded, hidden in plain sight on the *Viva Las Vegas* soundtrack. Jazzy, soulful, kind of Sinatra. I’d sung it at karaoke a few nights earlier. I can sing good, and it almost made me feel guilty. I enjoyed the spectacle of being a woman with a man’s voice, dressed nothing at all like a drag queen, singing something by the most popular artist ever that nobody really knows. Blowing the minds of some random senior citizens, dude. I guess that’s me in a nutshell.

The first time I mentioned my Elvis fandom to Olivia, she started talking about the La Toya Jackson version of “Burning Love”. This was the stupidest possible thing she could have said, and I loved her for it.

We met through La Toya, actually. I should tell you about that.

I had seen Olivia around once or twice when I was a Sydney Uni student, supposedly male and loping anonymously through an arts degree. Once she had the lunchtime DJ shift on a sunny day at the Manning Bar. I was pretty lonely, sinking ciders awkwardly on the couch, trying to make friends with the Simpsons Appreciation Society as it slowly dawned on me that we had nothing in common. My ears pricked up when I heard Stevie Wonder’s “Spiritual Walkers”, a weird song he did about Jehovah’s Witnesses that I’d never heard in public before. I started mouthing along with it, sussing out the DJ.

This was before everything. Before I was me and she was her. As far as I knew, I was looking at a fellow dude. She had bright orange tips in her hair. She was weedy, skittish, maybe a little greasy. She wasn’t using any of the equipment they’d given her, just a Macbook she’d plopped on top of the decks. The song was followed by an ad for Air Force recruitment, booming awkwardly over a courtyard full of hipsters. She had the nerve to DJ using the free version of Spotify.

We made eye contact, but I looked away, chicken. She doesn’t remember this. Every now and then I’d see her at things after that, and once she came up on Facebook as a Person I May Know, but for a long time, that was it.

Then she came out.

We met properly at a demolition party a year later. I was still living as a guy. Some randoms had been squatting in a warehouse on Addison Road, three doors down from my house. The building was due to be demolished and become a five-storey apartment block the following

week, and every hipster in the Inner West came out to tear the shit out of it. Everything in Sydney becomes apartments eventually, and it was as if we'd found an outlet for our collective property development rage. The irony was that we were sort of doing the developers' work for them.

That night was ruthless. I kept seeing fibro walls being kicked in and hearing shattering glass. It was like *Children of Men* in there. I was very drunk, and did that music highjacking thing, pulling the cord out of the house laptop. Fate had it that I chose La Toya Jackson's "Sexual Feeling." That damn piano kicked in at the start, and she must have recognised it immediately. I heard a husky voice:

"Who the fuck put this on?"

Olivia was standing among shattered longnecks and wine bottles, wearing a Dangerfield dress, lit by a kerosene bonfire. I had the phone in my hand, aux cable connecting me to the cheap Logitech speakers like an umbilical cord, like biology. She looked at me quizzically, and I felt some part of me disintegrate.

I recognised her right away and I also didn't. I knew it intellectually, but for the first time I realised in my deepest feelings what it actually means to be trans. At that time she was three months into hormones and didn't look all that different - a dress, some eyeliner, her face a little softer, maybe - but she was running on a new confidence that may as well have been a halo.

As La Toya's plastic moans filled the apocalyptic scene, I had absolutely no doubt that I was looking at a woman. It was all real. It was so beautifully obvious. It still hadn't occurred to me that I might be just like her. That would come later.

"La Toya!?" Her first words to me. (There's a space. It's two words.) Then the cops came.

So that's how we met. That's the night we first hooked up anyway. I had no idea how to suck *any* dick-- I certainly didn't have the niche, delicate skill set needed to suck an estrogenised dick. I think she just found me kind of funny.

There was a long gap after that, until I eventually came out myself and we got back in touch. Word got back that I'd named myself after her. She was mildly wiggled out but too curious, and eventually liked me too much, to care.

And that's how we eventually ended up on a regional train back from Parkes, exhausted, our minds full of Elvis whether we wanted him to be there or not, asleep together.

I woke up at sunset. The train had just left Katoomba and was heading towards Penrith. Olivia was subtly crying, looking at her phone. "What's wrong?", I said.

She angled the screen towards me. One bar of reception, battery almost dead, brightness on half.

"Legendary Artist David Bowie Dies at 69 After Secret Battle with Cancer."

"I feel like a dickhead," she said, choked up. I held her hand.

In six months of dating she'd never mentioned Bowie ever. Yet her reaction made so much sense to me. Put into sudden, shocking perspective, I realised how much he had done for gender in general. That was the truth of it: it was a sad day for gender.

We used the last remains of her battery to listen to his last single, "Lazarus." Olivia and I sat there in silence, taking up an earphone each. Listening to the lyrics, he obviously knew what was coming. The train pulled into Penrith and I watched someone take a bolt-cutter to the cage around a vending machine on the platform. I thought about Bowie's state of mind in those last days, getting these songs out of his system as it gradually failed on him, picturing people around the world, having the moment we were now having. I decided then that I was going to give myself a year to make up my mind if I wanted a vagina or not.

It seemed like a fitting tribute. I'd put off the whole surgery thing in my mind. I didn't really want to think about it. There's a great, cruel joke I heard once: "Cis people are so weird. The other day one of them asked me how trans people shower. I said, same as anybody else? You run the water, take your clothes off, then accidentally look down at yourself and cry for fifteen minutes." This was true for me about half of the time, maybe less. It seemed okay having it, but the idea of not having it was also nice. That's an important thing if you feel it even slightly. But how much of that was *me*? How much of it was peer pressure and the desire to be accepted, especially by men?

I'd been on hormones for nine months and just about everything in my heart had been redefined in some way. I'd been unsure about almost everything. I'd come to terms with a great deal of sadness and fear, but I'd also felt true happiness and fulfilment for the first time. I'd gone from being part of the depressing surplus of slimy cis guys to a soft-skinned woman with an extremely niche audience and a question mark constantly dangling over her head.

Flooding my system with estrogen had made me annoyingly pansexual. While it heightened my orgasms and made me feel unthinkably comfortable with myself, it also stirred up a thirst for men that I didn't know what to do with. There were times when I'd have sex with whoever and feel completely on top of it, like everything made sense. There were other times I felt I didn't really know how to have sex at all anymore, like I wasn't sure what sex even looked like. I felt very sad when I realised that straight women, by definition, wouldn't like me anymore. They were all I'd ever known. It was such a mess.

The phone died, just as I watched transit officers tackle the guy with the bolt cutters. My mind spun: 2016 was going to be all about my dick. I'd have sex with as many different people as I could, and then see how I felt. It was pretty exciting, really. I had no idea how it would all add up, what stories I'd have by the end of it.

If you had told me in this moment 'This is when it all begins,' I would have nodded. It would have made sense. I would have thought I'd understood.

I remember a video going around at the time; Hillary Clinton on the Jimmy Fallon show. She breaks out laughing when Trump's name is mentioned, and the audience joins her. A kneejerk reaction. "Are you intimidated by Donald Trump?", Fallon asks her. "No," she says, smirking. The audience laughs again.

I checked my phone again. Conor had messaged me twelve more times.

Two

Endless Summer

On Invasion Day, I fucked Olivia from behind as she leaned out my tiny window up to her arms, smoked a joint, and watched the council fireworks in Enmore Park. “Endless Summer” by The Jezabels played off my ‘dominant chill lesbian’ playlist as she sent smoke rings up to the night sky. A stray passerby would have seen a gothy trans woman in a Sarah Connor tank top, making strange little noises for no clear reason, her modest tits trembling a little against the frame. She actually seized the moment and yelled “Fuck Australia” out into the night, in between moans. I don’t think anyone else heard, but it made me hot in a strange way, and I went harder and deeper inside her. Her legs shook as I bit deeply into the back of her neck, making her scream.

I live in the sky-blue attic of a Marrickville sharehouse on Addison Road. My room is a triangular prism. The single window slides half open just enough to lean out of, and brings in just enough light for it not to be dark. I have an Ikea double bed, an Ikea cupboard, an Ikea desk, and not a lot else. Logitech speakers, Macbook. There’s a few posters awkwardly clinging to the 45-degree walls and an ever-present pile of library books next to my bed, including *Redefining Realness*, *Conundrum* and the mandatory *Whipping Girl*. If you go home with someone and they don’t have *Whipping Girl*, don’t fuck them.

My four Ikea lamps are strategically placed in certain corners of the prism, as I insist on mood lighting at all times after sunset.

I live with four men that I basically never see, including my landlord. I think they’re all gay and that it might even be some kind of deliberately gay-themed house with a secret underside to it, and that they might have read me as a gay man when I moved in, but I’m not sure. They can’t get rid of me now.

We have a fridge each, *each*, in the sterilised kitchen. That’s like, five fridges. I have this colossal white thing, humming day and night, and it rarely has more than a bottle of milk in it. The table is covered in plastic. There’s a giant Ken Duncan frame on the kitchen wall; a view of the ocean, pointless, sanitised. I’ve lived in plenty of gross houses, but it’s a bit unsettling how clean this one is. The wifi password is the landlord’s phone number. I’m terrified to have to

make small talk with anyone, so I just slide open the corrugated door and scuttle up the stairs to my room as quickly as possible.

The stairs are so narrow they can't possibly be legal. There's at been at least one person I couldn't bring home because I realised they wouldn't fit up the stairs. I say this not at all to bodyshame but only to condemn the stairs. I really wanted to sleep with this girl but she was living with her parents, and I had to awkwardly divert the conversation from my place. So all this tension just sat in a weird limbo. Can you imagine going over to somebody's house expecting sex, and then having to go home because you can't fit up the stairs? I didn't want to put anyone through that.

My fish tank sits in the middle of the room, on top of the stairwell. My two goldfish, Otis and Marlena, have a kind of sub-dom thing going on. Otis is white and silver with bulging doe eyes, the flirty, playful one. Marlena is the adult keeping order in the tank, a golden Bert to Otis' Ernie. Sometimes I see them cuddling on the floor at night as the filter bubbles incessantly above. I googled it; this is an actual thing that fish do sometimes for the same reasons as people. It's cute. I think every ideal animal relationship needs a dynamic like this.

The sun passes through the fishtank at noon. Sometimes I'll look up from my bed at just the right moment, and from exactly the right angle, to see through the tank, past the plastic plants, and out the tiny window, where a passing plane is coming in to land at Sydney Airport. I live right underneath the flight path. Each day we get either takeoffs or landings overhead, depending on the direction of the wind. On landing days, the engines literally rattle the walls and necessitate a pause in conversation roughly every 20 minutes. They call it the "Sydenham Pause." I'm used to it. It's one of those Sydney things.

I like planes. I think about planes a lot. I took flying lessons down at Camden Airport for a little while, back when I was a male office drone with money. I have a model of an Airbus A380 on a stand on my desk. It's my favourite plane, a real monster that takes up my entire field of vision when I look up on landing day. It's also slang I came up with for a really big dick with a lot of girth, and bulging hump. "Bitch had an A380. My legs are still shaking."

I work at the airport, too, I'll tell you about that later.

Olivia lives in Bankstown with her parents, but comes over more or less every night that I'm not seeing someone else. We're hoping the others in the house don't notice that she basically lives here now. It's not like they're hard to avoid.

I know so little about the men I live with. One guy told me he works at an ice creamery down in Coogee and comes from the Seychelles. Later, I found him on Grindr. Honestly, this house is a total mystery to me. I'm completely out of place as the only girl in here now and I think they kind of resent me for it. They've actually tried to kick me out for having too much sex before. One time, after being fucked senseless by a girl I met on Instagram named Lily, I got an SMS from

my landlord saying "This is not a sex place." I argued that my room was, in fact, exactly that. I never heard back from him.

God, and there was this whole other thing where he went at me for weeks, accusing me of not flushing. I don't know what the fuck he was talking about. I've got a surreptitious recording of the "house meeting" where he just yelled at me for fifteen minutes. He kept saying "I know it's you" and some shit about how my mother should've raised me better while the Japanese exchange student, the ice cream guy from the Seychelles and the other quiet men sat there in silence. He actually threatened to hit me if it happened again. I don't know what's wrong with him. It's in my iTunes voice memos folder. The one with my old name on it.

My old name. It doesn't matter what it is. They all knew me by it, or didn't know me. I don't care what they call me because they hardly call me anything.

Sometimes I find handprints on the angled walls above my bed. I can't tell whose they are anymore, whether they're from me, someone I brought over or if they were here before I moved in. The other day I found a digital camera in my third drawer down that I hadn't touched since I came out. There were two photos on it, both taken with flash in the darkness of my room. One was a pair of legs in my bed, crossed over, plump and smooth. The other was me as a guy, shirtless, above the camera, smiling. My relatively strong, somewhat hairy pre-estrogen arms propping me up. I have no memory of this at all, no idea who took the shots. Honestly, everything before I came out is a blur. The files are corrupted.

Maybe it was Caitlin. She was my last girlfriend before transition. She came over to the blue attic a lot. We bonded over *Star Trek*. She just wanted a nice boyfriend for sex, beer and decent conversation, and I could only pretend to be that person up to a point. I was Not a Guy, Not Yet a Woman. The subject came around to the Vulcans - purely logic-based, starved of emotion, not human, who I'd always related to and felt an affinity towards for reasons that eluded me - and we started talking about *pon farr*, where Vulcans only mate every seven years. "That's how I feel lately," I said. It just slipped out. And that's how it all unravelled.

Monogamy wasn't for me, nor was masculinity. Testosterone affected me in ways I didn't realise. I apparently said something at that point that I don't remember: "It's because I'm too feminine isn't it? You're not attracted to me. You don't like me because I'm too feminine. This is what happens. This is what always happens." She told me later that I said all this, and that she thought to herself, "*What the hell is he talking about?*"

The week after we broke up, they took away the bus stop across the street. In the month before they replaced it, there was nothing there at all, but the driver kept stopping at this now seemingly arbitrary spot when I rang the bell anyway, "Where's the stop?", I asked the driver. He shrugged.

"Let's just both remember it's there."

I still use Caitlin's Netflix login. She doesn't mind. I see her name all the time, keep up with the things she's watching. I noticed the day she fell asleep halfway through *Flubber*. I messaged her for the first time in a year; "How are you going to get through life if you can't get through *Flubber*?" I couldn't get through it either.

So yeah, I work at the airport. Like many trans women, I'm close to unemployable, deeply lacking in professional confidence despite my ability to flirt with anyone, and mostly dependent on Centrelink. But I randomly landed this bizarre job that I go to two days a week, just enough to keep me afloat.

You know the pens on strings that you use to fill out those departure cards, the customs declaration ones? They took those pens away, and replaced them with me. I sit at International Departures, right before the point of no return, at a little stand that says "PENS \$2" alongside the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute logo.

Victor Chang was a beloved local heart surgeon, an innovator who saved many lives and was generally held to be a top bloke. In the early 90s, he was shot in broad daylight in the middle of a major road during a botched kidnapping. You can look all this up if you want. I now sell pens on behalf of the charity his family set up in his name.

Victor's face haunts me. It really does. He stares at me from over my shoulder and on hundreds of those damn pens. A surprising number of people come up to me and tell me that he personally saved their life, or their dad's life. "I played the guy that shot him in a Channel Seven re-enactment," one guy said to me, my favourite of all the guys, heavy-hearted with some abstract sense of guilt. "I feel bad about that, so I'll take five pens."

My shifts start at 5:45am and end around 10am. I pull this off on public transport with a first train and a first bus. I'm the only person on both not wearing high-vis. Once at the terminal, I sink a massive coffee as soon as humanly possible then sit there at the cart, refreshingly invisible in a life where I'm being stared at most of the rest of the time. Not only do I fall back into boy mode in my oversized red uniform shirt, but everyone around me is too busy saying tearful goodbyes to their loved ones to possibly give a shit about me. I'm pretty much sitting there watching people cry for four to five hours. It's like the ending of *Casablanca* on loop.

I like telling people work stories. It's a big part of my schtick. Once I met a guy who said, "Oh, I work for the Chang Foundation too. I sell pens at Central Station." "No way!", I said.

"No," he laughed. "I'm a heart surgeon."

Three

Nightminds

Ghostbusters II predicted that the world would end on Valentine's Day 2016, and sometimes I wonder.

"I fix coffee machines in the Sutherland Shire by day," said Mitch, fixing her hair. "I'm trying to phase it out. I can't see myself rocking up with a toolbox to the Lilli Pilli Caltex in a dress and makeup, so I've been driving Ubers because it's something I can do independently and alone."

Mitch was a regular at the Women's Support Group. We met every second Sunday night to mixed results and Valentine's Day was no exception, giving this fluorescently-lit gathering a dark humour that Olivia and I sort of enjoyed. We were an established couple who could be doing something nice but were *still* here. The group was a motley crew of trans women at various stages of development and strength, some naturally taking on leadership roles and others coming under their wing. Every month we'd all sit in a circle and try our best to look after each other. Not that it was always so simple.

That night I sat and thought about how Prince was coming to Sydney in a week's time, and I wasn't going. It was a surprise tour, just him and a piano, and apparently he was busting out all kinds of rare shit. It sounded absolutely incredible. But there was no way I could afford something like that off my stupid pen money and Centrelink allowance.

I loved Prince, grew up on a heavy diet of his work, permanently in awe of him and all his queerness. I'd seen him before, a couple of times, but always as a man. Once I got to see him play all night at one of those legendary club aftershows. He dropped "She's Always in My Hair" at three in the morning and everyone lost their minds. These days Olivia and I rock out to that song all the time. God, in hindsight that was the sort of gig you really need to be in the closet to afford. Coming out as trans meant I'd gotten used to never spending more than \$20 in any one transaction. I was pretty depressed about missing him this time around but I sat on the folding chair in the damn circle, listening to other trans girls' problems, trying to block it out. I knew he'd come back eventually.

These meetings were held at Trans2038, an underfunded, cynical organisation perpetually stuck in the 70s, run by demotivated veterans who were completely out of touch and no use to

most of us. The only exception was Grace, who ran these meetings-- a trans woman in her 40s, always in heels, looking like she came from a high-powered business meeting 20 years ago. She was self-motivated and kind and generally thought to be angelic. Sometimes she'd bring her dog to the meetings. She'd say "Tell me how you've been feeling" and give you the option to speak to her or the dog. She always tried to keep solemn and serious through what anyone shared, like this was AA or church group or something.

I really loved Mitch. Nobody in her life outside of here knows she's a woman yet, and nobody would ever guess. Even we couldn't see it at first. People have said things about her like "I know that anyone can be trans, but like, *really!*?"

One of my favourite Mitch stories was the tale of the Magic Ticket. She committed herself to not paying for public transport and talked about it like she was some kind of freedom fighter. She'd chanced on a \$1.10 Concession MyBus1, the cheapest possible ticket, that was faulty in some way that meant it kept making the "Good sound" when you dipped it in, even after it had been used. She got literally hundreds of bus trips out of it over several years. It lasted right up until they phased out paper tickets in general, and it's still in her wallet.

Then there was the time she jumped onto the open bridge between train carriages after it had started to move. While carrying pizza. She claims she then went into the carriage and said "Anyone order a pizza?", but I don't know if I believe that part. Another time she reckons she managed to make an express train stop for her while stuck out at Kembla Grange station in the middle of the night. In the rain. She stood at a certain point on the platform and tried to look desperate, tried to imply by eye contact with the driver that she was a jumper. And he actually stopped. Only Mitch could flag down an unscheduled train. All her stories seemed to involve public transport in some way and I really liked them all.

She always comes to the pub afterwards. Most of us do, cause everyone knows that's when it gets good. She rocks up every month in a blue singlet and jeans, and flirts with the other girls in a way that is so goofy and blatant and ridiculous that it tends to work. She mansplains and manspreads. One time she got really drunk and broke out into "Bloke" by Chris Franklin at the top of her lungs. There was a bit of a stunned silence after that, and someone said "I can't wait to see you in a dress."

She actually did show up in a dress once. That night is the stuff of legend in our little circle. It happened to be a pretty sparsely attended meeting, but I was there, and it was just such a beautiful thing. She was relaxed and comfortable in a way that I have never seen her since. She had just been to a Missy Higgins concert and kept talking about it, excitedly showing us blurry footage she'd shot on her phone. She said her favourite song was "Nightminds." I love that song too. I mean, don't get me wrong; I love the idea of trans women feeling comfortable to express themselves in ways society codes as blokey. Still, I cried on the bus home that night, thinking about how much happier she looked and sounded, and listening to that beautiful song. I wish I could see that side of her more, but she's never mentioned Missy since.

Our regular post-meeting pub was the Annandale Hotel down the street. In Laura Jane Grace's autobiography she talks about throwing up in the bathrooms at the Annandale while on tour in Sydney back in the day. This kind of became a running joke once we heard about it. Trans women love Laura Jane Grace to the point where you could almost imagine us making a regular pilgrimage to the spot where she vomited her guts out once. Not that we'd go into the men's.

The Annandale was where the group kind of came alive, shed itself of the awkwardness and formality that comes when any group of people are made to sit in any kind of circle. There were dynamics at play that I gradually became a part of. Veteran Rebecca would show up every week, often complaining that she felt "stuck in Year 10" having to go over and over the introductory content for the newbies each time. She passes too well and is straight, and often complains about it. You know what? I also think she would vote Liberal if she wasn't trans.

Once someone showed up at the pub and started chatting with us all, seemed to know what they were talking about, knew all the names of the hormones and so forth. They were talking like they had years of experience. But they just looked like a cis guy to me. They had a flanno shirt and kind of gross jeans, and a beard that they'd been growing at least a few months. "I normally would never ask this," I said, "but what gender are you?" "Oh, female," they said. "The shirts hide the breast growth, the beard hides the face changes. I've started and stopped about three times. I just can't deal with it. I think I'm going to start again." I'd never met someone who had to detransitioned before. It was daunting witness that much pain, to think about what it must be like.

Early in the year, Trans2038 started selling hats that said *MAKE GENDER GREAT AGAIN* and we couldn't believe it. Not long before that, they'd copped a lot of flak for hosting the Trans Day of Remembrance ceremony at a police station. Now Trump's campaign was gathering steam and starting to become genuinely scary and this was their response. That honestly kind of said everything about why nobody wanted to associate with them anymore. A few people stopped coming to meetings after that. But Trans2038 were the only game in town, so Olivia and I begrudgingly decided to stick it out. You just had to think about Grace-- the kind one, the only person in the whole place who knew what she was talking about and how to communicate with people properly. You had to think about her, struggling against the system to do something worthwhile.

Kate was the token mother duck. Every trans support group needs one. These are the people who haven't been out for a long time, but are middle-aged and kindly. They have lived long enough to know the virtues of being nice and treating others well. But they haven't been out long enough to become jaded, for their politics or their attitudes to trans things to be stuck in the past in some way. We go down to the beach and talk about our lives sometimes.

Joanna was the bass player in a famous band and a minor celebrity who'd show up every now and then. She was a big inspiration to me when her coming out video went viral a few years

ago. I tried to play it cool when she showed up. I ran into her at an Against Me! concert once and watched all these people come up to her and fawn over her, ask her for photos. I felt like royalty by association. We screamed out "True Trans Soul Rebel" together and it was all pretty cinematic.

Anna was very sweet. I went on a date with her once. She was so shy she could hardly speak, and I had to ask her if she was okay. She couldn't form a sentence. I had to hold her hand just to get her through a midday beer. I gradually got out of her that she was into plants. I took her to the Botanical Gardens and watched her blossom, so to speak. There was a plant-related photography exhibition on at the State Library and I took her there, then across the harbour, on the ferry, to Wendy Whiteley's secret garden. It was so nice. But I never saw her again either. That's a phrase I associate with trans women a lot: *And then I never saw her again.*

It was somewhat of a hierarchy, even if weren't open about it. Number of months out, number of months on hormones, number of meetings attended-- all of these figures were wordlessly averaged out into a kind of social ranking. The divide between young and old was quite obvious and often led to disagreements, basic worldview stuff, as there would be between any group of people. The older trans women tended to put up with a lot more, to think we should be grateful for what we have, to have more affiliation with drag and nightclub culture. The younger trans women tended to go the other way, talking about fully automated luxury space communism and all that. We tried to keep it to what we could agree on.

19-year-old Zoe kept playing with her hair the whole time we spoke, the first time I met her, obsessively twirling it, over and over. I found out she was staying in a psych ward and had just moved down from Brisbane after a nightmarish series of incidents that had almost wrecked her life up there. So many of us have some origin city, a story to go with some other place we've fled. She had an adorable girlfriend named Julia who was 17 and had this beautiful little voice. She kept talking about the trans superheroes she was writing, the one who wore our flag as a cape. She was waiting until she turned 18 to start hormones without her parents permission, and it made me so sad.

Then there was Nedra. I actually met her independently of any of this. We were at a punk gig in Newcastle, watching a bunch of gender-diverse bands. I think it was organised by a youth centre or something. I liked her immediately. I ended up having an unrequited crush on her that was much too powerful for my own good.

That first night I met her, I talked to her about trans stuff for maybe two hours, assuming she was cis. It just would never have occurred to me. In hindsight, she sat there with such patience and grace, putting up with this. The whole rundown about hormones and everything. Stuff she knew much better than me. She had too much class to just come out with it, to say "I'm trans." She finally slipped it in after I'd passed a test of some kind, proven that I was alright, I think.

"I'm surprised that it all happened so suddenly for you," she said. "I was just a kid when I figured it out."

"Figured *what* out!?", I said, suddenly realising. I couldn't pin any of her features to what she was saying. There was just no way to tell. I learnt not to assume anything about anyone that day. I guess that's one of the main things I've got out of being trans in general; never make assumptions of any kind, about anyone, ever.

The first time I brought Nedra to a meeting, people were looking at me dirty, like I'd brought along an intrusive cis girlfriend. I soon learnt what she was talking about when she said passing wasn't everything, that she resented the whole concept, and that it's not always a good thing. They made her introduce herself, like they always did with the new people, and again she just didn't want to say hey, I'm trans. "I'm a friend of Olivia's," she said instead, by way of explanation. Grace said something like "Well, I'm glad to see that you're being supportive." I watched Nedra cringe, subtly.

It also dawned on me that if I passed flawlessly, I wouldn't be able to hit on trans women as easily and comfortably as I now do. I'd lose that instant bond, the "we're all in this together" sort of feeling.

We *are* all in this together, though. Despite all the things we argue about, the things that make us different. I remember one moment at the annual support group Christmas party when everyone was just talking among each other. I sat there and just watched all these different kinds of people bonding, all at different stages of transition and with such different ways of expressing their femininity. There was a brief lull in the conversation and I realised someone had put Against Me! on. The song was "Two Coffins" and it hit me right in the heart. I always thought that that song was about Laura's own life-- one coffin now for her male identity, one eventual coffin for her true self. But it turns out it's about her kid, that it's a wonderfully morbid way in which she expressed love for her daughter. I think it works both ways, and when I heard that song faintly in the background that night, I'd never felt prouder to be a trans woman in my life.

But anyway. Every meeting had a main discussion theme, and on Valentines Day 2016, it happened to be *SURGERY*. How romantic. Grace laid it all out for us, all the household names-- Dr. Suporn, Dr. Chettawut, Dr. Kunaporn, Mr. Ives, Dr. Evans-- and the pros and cons of each. She'd had it done by Chettawut herself a few years ago and told us all about it in detail, how it works, what recovery is like. Apparently the clinic gave her a USB stick, *with a dolphin on it*, that had before, after and even *during* photos. Not many people outside the trans community know about the dilation process that follows the surgery. Basically, to stop the new vagina closing up like an open wound, we have to fuck ourselves with a dilator, quite painfully, for a long time, every day, eventually getting it down to once a month. This is all part of the decision; asking yourself if this would still be worth it. We hung on her every word.

“The thing you’ve got to think about,” she said to sum up, “is what you plan to use it for. How much depth do you really want? Who are you planning to have sex with? Keep an open mind-- Do you even want it done at all? And most of all, never, ever forget this.” She paused for dramatic effect. “There’s always anal.”

Silence settled over the room.

“There sure is”, said Mitch, wearing a shit-eating grin.

Four

Thriller

I've been through 2016 so many times now that it's hard to keep track of it exactly. It seems to lose something each time I go over it, the way a videotape starts to show up with those white lines if you play it too much. Wear it down enough and you'll only see static. I wonder if it'll get to that point eventually. I try not to think about it.

Let me tell you about Sandy. I really loved Sandy.

I met her through *Nevada*, the novel by Imogen Binnie. "Have you read *Nevada*?" You might have heard this before. It's kind of become a cliché to hear a trans woman say that now. Honestly, this whole thing you're reading is basically a ripoff of *Nevada* without drugs. I think more people should rip that book off. There should be hundreds of *Nevadas*; it should be a genre. *Fifty Shades of Nevada*.

Have you read *Nevada*?

You should read *Nevada*.

Sandy did, and that's how she figured herself out.

She posted about it on one of the many trans support groups I found myself in, the secret layer of Facebook that was slowly opening up to me and beginning to dominate my newsfeed. She was all *Nevada* this, *Nevada* that. We've all been there. "I hadn't read a novel in over a decade until this," Sandy said. "Fuck Imogen Binnie for writing it. Seriously." We got talking from there.

Sandy named herself after Olivia Newton John's character in *Grease*, which I thought was the cutest thing ever. That really was her aesthetic; all sweetness and light, classic femme, wholesome leather jacket. Sandy also had the misfortune of both living in Melbourne and being

stuck in a marriage with a real-life cis woman at the time she came out. Ten years of commitment based on a lie. Killed by a book.

Sometimes a trans person will come out within a seemingly hetero marriage and it will turn out their partner is also trans in some way. This makes everything easier, and it happens a lot because we're good at subconsciously seeking each other out. Sandy was not so lucky. Genuine cis people in that situation tend to freak the fuck out. They can only watch helplessly as a person they took as a basic tenet of their simple life slowly ceases to exist. Their ex gets to experience a brand new life with an amusement park worth of new emotions, while they go back to single life again as the same cis person a bit older and with more baggage. They resent the whole thing. I've heard about support groups where partners of trans people get together with the idea of, you know, actually supporting each other, but just end up enabling each other's dark rage.

One thing I do want Phoebe to know is that Sandy and I honestly weren't flirting before they decided to separate. I'm a slut, but I wouldn't do that. I let her make her own decisions and put her happiness first, and that led to us inevitably coming together for a while.

Our affair started the day she sent me an photo of a page in her diary that said *Help! I have a crush on Olivia, but she's important to me as a friend. I wonder if I should tell her.* I was at the beach when I got this. It made me very happy. I was about to be her first sexual partner, other than her wife, in a decade. I was about to be her first time having sex without pretending to be a guy.

I didn't let her down.

She started HRT and came up to see me on a train the next day. That's the train from Melbourne. Eleven hours, more than a laptop's full charge, with no power supply and no reception for most of it. Part of why she chose land transport, she admitted to me later, was to have eleven full hours away from Phoebe. I later found out that she spent five of those hours chatting to the teenage girl seated across from her. She kept stealing curious glances and obviously wanted to talk. Sandy finally caved after Wagga Wagga, took her earphones out, and gave her the full Trans 101. She lapped it all up, and get this: she was on her way to *bible camp*.

Whoever that girl was would've seen Sandy and I run into each other's' arms the moment she finally got into Central Station. She would have seen me pulling out a bouquet of pink flowers with the trans flag in it, and both of us making out, overjoyed to be in each others' company. Whoever she was, I hope this is all burned into her memory. I hope she told all her friends at bible camp all about it, and her stupid fucking parents too.

We stayed at the Cactus Tree Motel in Enfield, the cheapest place in the whole city she could find, some Groupon deal. She could have just stayed at mine, but she was flush with cash from

her IT job and just thought it would be funny to stay in a the worst motel possible, like we were having a seedy affair. Liverpool Road thrummed audibly outside as we pulled up the Venetian blinds and took in the view of the KFC parking lot. I showered off the dust. The TV was bolted to the wall, the bed bolted to the floor. It was all so dodgy, and in some ways, the atmosphere really enhanced our fucking.

In hindsight, I think she chose this setting in part because she really did want me to be a seedy affair. I don't think she was mature enough for anything else. I suspect that ten years of marriage, at a time when she really should have been single, had stunted her growth in a way that meant she'd need more than ten years to catch up on how you were supposed to treat your lovers these days, in the adult world, outside of whatever fucked up dynamic she had with that cis bitch. I'm going to tell you a nice story, but it later ended very badly in a way I don't want to write about. In fact, I hate Sandy now and it makes me very sad. I'd still like you to take all this as the nice thing that it was, that it seemed to be, at the time.

So, like. We had a lot of sex. She was extra thick and I took her very hard, deep into my mouth and ass, over and over again. In my relationship with Olivia I tended to be a top; this was something very different. I felt like prey, in a good way. Like I was being torn apart.

Phoebe apparently never swallowed for Sandy, thought it was gross. Not me. The first time Sandy came in my mouth I took it all down immediately, hungrily. Her immediate reaction was to cackle, almost maniacally, out of disbelief that she could feel this good. That life could even *be* like this. Gender euphoria. She sounded like Vincent Price at the end of "Thriller." I ended up taking eight or nine loads to the throat in three days.

I vividly remember when she made me cry. She had me bent over the dodgy hotel bed and broke me in gradually, giving me instructions, schooling me in how best to take a dick of this size and heft. "Breathe," she said, insistently. "Do the *opposite* of tensing up." I still hear that voice in my head sometimes, at moments when I'm being a good girl and taking an A380 from some gorgeous bitch. I felt my body ease and become accepting, and I heard her voice switch from teacher mode to primal mode, to a mental state of pure fucking. She made a sound like "*Oh*" that marked the crossover point, then picked up rhythm and speed, until I could sense nothing else but her enormous presence inside me. This went on for a long time and I burst into tears, overloaded with joy.

I felt like such a girl. I felt that I would really like to have a vagina someone could do this to. Really, really. I felt that would be the best possible thing.

This all happened in early March, coincidentally during the famous Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, an event that I have rarely attended in my life, never attended as an out trans woman, and never taken more than minimal pride in. Sandy and I went for coffee one day at the underrated cafe on the rooftop of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Stereotypical Sydney view in the background, Sandy in a really beautiful summer dress in the foreground. As she put our

flat whites on credit, the guy behind the counter said “Partying already, eh?”

“No,” she said, sourly realising what he meant as the transaction cleared. “These are just my clothes.”

I had been struggling to put my finger on exactly what bothered me about Mardi Gras and why I never want to go. That moment really summed it up, and I’ve cited it ever since.

Olivia says I love it when things sum things up.

That same day I took Sandy to the Sydney Observatory, up on Dawes Point. We toured the museum, which is pretty dull. We did get to see the metal ring receiver that picked up the moon landing TV signal, and took a photo of it as if it had some kind of symbolic weight for us. We set up a picnic in the grass near the gazebos and I pointed out all the rivers and bays and all the history I could think of. I don’t know how interested she was, but she seemed to like being around me in general. I told her the story of William Dawes and Patyegarang, which is a thing you should look up, a bittersweet interracial love story that sits at the heart of Sydney’s dark origins as a penal colony. I think about them a lot.

On the roof of the observatory is a “time ball,” a hydraulic timekeeping device for ships that has worked reliably since the 1870s. Every day at 1pm, the ball drops down the shaft. Quickly at first, then slowly the rest of the way.

We watched the ball drop together.

It was pissing down the morning she went back to Melbourne, also by train. We got up early, checked out of the Cactus Tree and fought our way back to the same platform at Central where we first met. I said goodbye and watched the train pull off into the distance. In the rain.

As the engines faded into the cold, I could hear a busker’s trumpet playing Stevie Wonder’s “Send One Your Love.” He had a backing track playing through a tinny amp, the complete sound echoing off the ornate marble of the Central lobby. It wasn’t even the single version, it was the instrumental from *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*. The words ran silently through my head.

This was all so cinematic and corny that it’s amazing it actually happened to me. I got enough *Casablanca* at work, now this. Of all the songs in the world, I had to get a nice one about flowers. I messaged her with a YouTube link to the song, told her I was crying. She said she was crying too, sent back a song by The Kinks. We were sharing a moment. I listened to her song later and I didn’t get it. She probably felt the same about mine.

Some things are just for you.

Five

Still Would Stand All Time

"You are invited," the letter from Hanalei began, *"to become a woman."*

This was written in Papyrus font, on stained paper, over a painted backdrop of a lighthouse illuminating the ocean purple on a stormy night.

*"The Femme Divine Collective summon you to a Transgendered Priestess Christening.
Harness the power of the full moon to nurture and activate your inner Womb.
Blossom. Ecstasise. Empower. Activate.
Gather at midnight on Brighton-le-Sands Beach, Thursday, April 21st, 2016.
RSVP to cleopatra@femmedivine.org.au."*

I read this out loud to Olivia, right up to the domain name. "What do you think?" She snatched it from me, looked at it blankly. "They said activate twice."

"Yeah," I said. "I think Hana's in a cult."

"Do you wanna go anyway?", she said, smirking.

I did.

I'd been wondering what was happening to Hana for some time. I'd known her since we were both kids. She lived a block away from me when we were both in high school, and she had an earthy sweetness to her that resounded deeply with teenage me. I'd never met anyone like her before. She moved to Goulburn when I was 18 and I missed her like crazy. I didn't really understand what these kind of emotions were, how to deal with them, what they were all about. I got a lot of heart-wrangling art out of the whole experience that I'm much too embarrassed to show anyone now. We hadn't been in touch for a long time, but she came out of the woodwork again after I transitioned. And she just didn't look right to me.

When we met again over coffee, she told me excitedly that just moved into an all-female sharehouse in Bexley North, a house named “Hejira.” Olivia and I went to the housewarming party a few days later. The head of Hejira was a 38-year-old woman who called herself Cleopatra, a former musician who’d peaked with a few R&B hits in the mid-90s. She literally sat on a throne in the living room. Everyone who else lived there adoringly called her “Cleo”, and they all felt suspiciously similar to each other. That night I met a lot of obviously fragile cis women in their early 20s, one after another, all in hemp pants and braids. They were like a toy collection.

There were “themed rooms” at that party and a Twerking 101 class. There were a lot of craft workshops, of sitting in circles and holding hands, a lot of rhetoric about womanhood, and an insistent encouragement to open up to everyone about your deepest fears. The Femme Divine Collective, as they soon started calling themselves, now has a verbose and long-winded website that mostly invites you to “workshops” of mysterious content and purpose, backed up only by vague testimonials.

All night I noticed they’d say and do weird shit and then have this way of kind of talking circles around you until you were convinced it was normal, that all their goddess posturing was something that a healthy person could be involved in and that it was all fine. There were rumours around that Scientology had something to do with it, but I’m not sure if there’s anything to that. “I feel like everyone here is wearing a skin suit,” Olivia said that night, “and if you unzipped one of them, you’d see nothing but bugs.”

In hindsight, I am ashamed of the fact we actually went to Brighton-le-Sands at midnight for this thing. I am ashamed of the fact we thought this was all funny.

Brighton is a strange beach. It’s a very long stretch of coast along Botany Bay, Sydney Harbour’s evil twin. The water is different out there. It’s hostile and murky, swimmable yet undoubtedly corrupted by generations of industry and grime. Let’s say you’re standing in the middle of it, looking out between the heads to the Pacific Ocean. To the left is Sydney Airport runway, which extends far into the bay and sits flush with the horizon. It’s as if you’re watching planes take off and land on the ocean itself. Then there’s La Perouse, named after the French explorer who landed there in 1788 just after the First Fleet did, swapped coloniser notes with the British and probably had a cup of fucking tea, set sail, and then was never seen again. I don’t know if anywhere else in the world is named after a person who visited once and then disappeared without a trace forever.

Clawing guiltily at your vision to the right is Kurnell, the place where Captain Cook notoriously first landed in 1770 and began the nightmare that terrorised a continent. Behind you, as in directly behind you, as soon as the sand stops, is a roaring four-lane highway sneeringly called The Grand Parade and a busy restaurant and club district. I don’t know if I can express the eeriness of Brighton-le-Sands to you, the haunted quality it takes on at all times of the day and especially at night.

That night we parked across the road from an Elvis-themed pizza place, the Jailhouse Rock. Their campy statue of Elvis in the '68 Comeback leather suit had been dragged inside for the night. He stared out at us from the window, frozen, microphone to his lips.

There were four of the Hejira girls waiting for us at the beach when we showed up, a red-tinged full moon hanging overhead. They greeted us wordlessly and adorned us with pink beads, like we were getting off a plane in Hawaii, while Justin Bieber's "Where Are U Now" pounded away from the street over nightclub chatter, muffled in the background. The night had a *Picnic at Hanging Rock* feeling to it, and we kind of got caught up in it despite ourselves. They chanted and held hands a lot, and bathed us in the gross water. It was thick, goopy, and not even cold.

It eventually became clear to me that they were conceptualising this as more of an exorcism, like there was some maleness to us that needed to be ceremonially cast away. They'd take turns blessing us, holding a single hand to our foreheads and saying these contrived feminine prayers, and I'd see flashes of anger hidden in their passion. In this way, I saw some of the pain and resentment they obviously had for men come to the surface. I saw echoes of fathers and brothers and ex-boyfriends, awful ghosts, and wondered how much they had to do with everything.

They'd all talk about the sense of belonging they'd achieved, how comfortable and together they felt sharing energy with their sisters, airing out their traumas. We went along with most of it, and sat there chatting with them for a long time.

We laughed our asses off when we got back in the car at 3:30 in the morning. We made fun of the most absurd things they'd said, impersonated their voices, made a list of the buzzwords they'd repeated the most often. Olivia said the water smelt like pussy. She was right, and I couldn't unsmell it.

I was covered in the smell of pussy and I was now a Real Woman. I badly wanted to shower.

On the way back to my house, we stopped at the St. Peters McDonald's on the highway as we were both badly in need of chips. Olivia parked. We sat there for a few seconds and watched a little fluffy dog that someone had tied to the front of the place while on a midnight walk. He was running in semi-circles, jumping and barking joyfully, straining to catch a glimpse of his owner inside. "He wants a burger so bad!", I said. I got out and walked in.

A few minutes later, I got back in the car. "Gosh, that was a debacle," I said. "The screen on the self-serve thing was out, just totally black. The guy came out and tried to fix it and it still didn't work, but I somehow had the exact muscle memory to press just the right places on the black screen to order--"

“Hey, look,” she said, heavily. “Something’s happened.”

“What, did the pupper get his burger?”

“No,” she said. “I’m serious. Something’s happened. I don’t know if this is the time to tell you.”

“What is it?”

She couldn’t look me in the eye. She ran her hands down her legs, smoothing out her jeans.
“Prince died. I’m really sorry.”

The limp paper bag was still in my grip. I felt my hands weaken, my sense of touch diminishing.
“What happened?” My own voice sounded small, insignificant.

“They-- they don’t really know yet,” she said. “He was alone in an elevator at Paisley Park...
They *found* him.”

I knew that this day would come eventually. But I thought I’d be 85 and living in a *Jetsons* house, and that the news would come to me through some kind of hologram feed built into my glasses. I didn’t picture myself in a McDonald’s parking lot at 4am, aged 26, smelling faintly of gross ocean. Come to think of it, I didn’t realise I’d be a woman either. This wasn’t right. It wasn’t supposed to happen. None of this was normal. Yet it was all real, and it all made a kind of sense.

Bowie was one thing. I appreciated him, but I was detached from him. This was different. I had a lifetime of memories around Prince. He taught me about love, religion and sex. He embodied all of these things. I used to say that you could get everything you needed to know about life from his work. I remember walking to an ex-girlfriend’s house in 2014 when I got a push notification that he had just dropped a new single, “U Know.” I came in and said, hey, Prince just did a thing, and put it on. And we were fucking. Like before I knew it, we were just fucking. It was an instinctive response that we barely had control over. That was his purple magic.

I thought about “Still Would Stand All Time.” I never really understood what he meant by that, but I got it now. I understood that he died without fear.

Suddenly our cynicism about the ritual we’d just been through kind of melted. Events took on a certain weight and came into perspective, and life seemed so precious and short. Here we were grieving our deceased guru, the man whose work had been a spiritual compass to the both of us, the magical genderqueer sprite with a direct line to God.

Were we really so different from the Femme Divine Collective? I mean, yes, we were. Our spirituality wasn’t delusional in the same way, wasn’t a cult. It was just that it now seemed so

important to be nice. They had been condescending to us in a way that was frustratingly cis, but we did not respond with kindness. We were not kind to these vulnerable people.

It was all so strange. It made no sense to me. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd entered into some unholy new timeline, that I was living a life that wasn't meant to be.

God, the full moon too. It was so strange, so sad. And life went on. The sun came up, and I watched the first plane of the day come in to land.

It was an Airbus A380.

PART TWO

No Scrubs

Six

Some Other Time

You're on a date with a straight cis guy. He's acting like he's doing you a smug favour, like he's Simon Cowell watching you audition. You have in fact read *Infinite Jest* and this disappoints him. He wanted to talk *at* you, to be the entertainment. Plus, the fact you know guy stuff makes you look and sound like one. You're talking about David Foster Wallace's fixation on tennis, or his thing about spiders, or how that Jason Segel movie made a nice thing out of a cruel book, and mid-sentence, you notice this guy's wheels are visibly spinning. You can see the panic in his eyes: *This is just a dude. What am I doing here?*

Meanwhile you're thinking: *You have no idea how much I'm objectifying you right now. Not even objectifying-- liquefying. If estrogen didn't shut down semen production, there is no way I'd be here. If I just wanted dick, I could find a trans woman and have a wonderful time. I wouldn't have to prove anything. We'd cuddle a lot and I'd never feel afraid. I wouldn't have to pack a knife in my handbag. I don't even want your body. I want you for a liquid that you produce. I want cum so bad that I am, statistically, seriously risking my life for it. I want you to unload it on my pretty girl face. But you never will.*

You're a date with a straight cis guy and he Seems Nice. You get caught up in the "I finally found a nice one!" feeling. You start talking about the others who were all such disappointments, the scary things you saw in their bedrooms. You start *Nevada*-ing them, letting them in on this whole thing. You're a novelty act, but you don't care. You're going to be a story about that one time they did a crazy thing. Whatever; be whatever they need you to be, as long as you end up getting laid. You couldn't possibly be less emotionally invested.

He's a music teacher, plays in a jazz band. You forget who you're talking to and think it's a proper conversation. He brings up Bill Evans and you know and enjoy a few Bill Evans albums. *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*, *Conversations with Myself*. Your favourite song is "Some Other Time." You're not showboating, you just know a handful of things about a thing he likes. And there's that disappointment again, his face falling, lenses turning. Your jawline sharpens, your shoulders widen, your voice deepens. He's got that *this is a dude* panic again, trying to figure out how to get out of this thing. Meanwhile you've got your *this is a gronk* panic. You were foolish to expect more. To think he'd be different.

Now he's saying something about how it's hard to sleep with a woman who shares his interests and something else about being friends. Your stomach turns but your mind is elsewhere. You're still thinking about cum. You love the immense buildup of pressure in a cis guy's body, the trembling leg muscles. You only watch facial compilations when you watch porn. You often can tell who's coming, just from the way it comes out. You can tell a Mark Rockwell from a Kris Slater, a Danny D from a Manuel Ferrara. It's like distinguishing Miles from Coltrane. Jizz jazz. Every load is unique. You wonder if there are any trans girls or NBs with dicks around who are self-aware, comfortable in their sexuality and not on HRT, because they would be perfect for this craving of yours, but they tend to be hard to find.

You crave the moment when the seal breaks. You love it when it gets in the target's hair, just a little. Or when the load is so dramatic it overshoots completely and splashes on an expensive white leather couch, somewhere in LA. But it'll never be on you.

You can sense when the guy really means it. You can tell when the *passion* is there, and you want to be the cause of that kind of passion. You want to be load-summoning. You want to be the kind of girl one of these fucking dirtbags thinks about giving a facial to. You want one of them to dwell on it for weeks and then finally get what he wants, all over you. But you have more dignity than to put up with this guy.

You were warned about "chasers." These men treat you as a walking kink. You have never physically met one. They're so transparent, so unable to rein themselves in. The very first message they send will be something about your dick. It's easy to go, oh, that's a chaser, then wave them away. These men are a mild irritation; they are not your concern.

You're on a date with a straight cis guy. You're going through the spiel, fluttering your eyelashes, talking in your Minnie Mouse voice. You're talking about hormones, trying to make the changes sound hot. "My skin is softening, my freckles are coming out, and I'm getting thicker around the hips" you'll say. You're horny as fuck. You'll gesture to your boobs, leaning forward: "These are real, if you're wondering,"

Then they'll start asking questions in a particular way. They might say something about being jealous. They'll try to pass it off as a joke: "Sign me up!" And suddenly things are different, and it's your face that's falling. Maybe you end up sleeping with them, and they drop the first hint into pillow talk. They'll dip their toes in: "So like... I was wondering..."

Another one. I mean, it's kind of a rite of passage, and you were one of these guys once, as your girlfriend keeps fucking reminding you. But you're sick of it. A year from now, this guy will probably be a woman that you would love to date. Right now, you want to scrape him off like a barnacle.

You can't help but feel that no actual cis man has the balls to fuck you properly without feeling that the earth is caving in just because you exist. You would be happy for a real one, confident and certain in himself, say, one reading this right now, one who is capable of basic respect for other human beings and holding a reasonably interesting conversation, to get in touch with you and put some of that confidence and certainty all over you sometime. Some other time.

("Some Other Time" intensifies.)

You knew it was a bad idea to meet a guy for sex at his house first.

You talked about the 80s *Twilight Zone* series on OKCupid and that was basically enough. He also said he'd been with trans women before, which tends to be a good sign in some way or another. At least you won't get the *Gee golly gosh, I've never done this before* moment.

He meets you at Canterbury station, takes you up four flights of stairs in an apartment building with no elevator. His bearded housemates are so absorbed in whatever's on the glowing screen in the dark living room that they don't spare a single glance for either of you as you slink into his bedroom. He has a big whirring computer setup and some stray cans of Monster on the table. He has a single *Star Wars* poster up and it's *Clone Wars*, not even one of the proper films.

You watch the *Twilight Zone* episode where words begin to change meaning, one-by-one, until English becomes unrecognisable. "Lunch" becomes "dinosaur." You cuddle awkwardly, with no real connection, as the main character slowly loses his mind. "Anniversary" becomes "throw-rug." Eventually the camera zooms out as the character accepts his fate. He sits in his son's bedroom, reading a page of an alphabet book with a picture of a dog: *Wednesday*.

You put on "Shadow Play" from the original series, but neither of you are really watching. This guy's dick is massive, the size of a 800 ml Voss. It's really hot and it gives you chills just to touch it. Out of the blue you find yourself thinking *Dr. Chettawut would have a field day with you*.

When you brag about it to your girlfriends later, one of them turns out to have been sexted by him before and knows the exact dick you're talking about.

"I kind of want to let you fuck me with that?", you say, trailing your fingernails along it. "Not a good idea," he says, sadly. "Believe me. I could really hurt you. I've ruptured cervixes before." You feel totally up for it anyway, but something in his voice tells you there's more to what he's saying, like it has more to do with him. So you suck him off and he comes in your mouth and it's very, very good in theory. But it's as if he's going through the motions.

You pull out your vibrator and start working yourself over, moaning softly. He pulls out his phone. "I've got a million notifications," he says, almost to himself, staring absently at the dull glow. You turn the vibrator off. "Look," you say, not upset or angry, more concerned. "What's wrong? You've got a pretty girl in your bed and it's like I'm not even here."

Then it starts coming out: He got fired and broken up with in the week before Christmas. He's been thinking about transitioning for seven years. But he doesn't *see the point*, because he doesn't feel anything anyway. He doesn't think gender is meaningful in a world where life has no meaning. He feels like he's just a sack of flesh, drifting aimlessly through this life until he dies.

He says all this without moving once. You tell him that there are people who have never thought about transitioning at all, many of them actually, and they are called cis. You tell him you're going home because it would be less lonely to be alone than to spend the night next to him.

You shower first, to get the lube off. His shower floor is covered in dirt. The stream from the showerhead is a pathetic trickle. It wouldn't pass for a tap.

You're at the General Gordon Hotel in Sydenham, on a date with someone who says they're a cis guy. They have such a soft babyface that you actually thought they were a trans guy at first. You're talking about Kanye and they don't seem to mind your reasonable working knowledge of guy culture. You're getting looks and snickers from the resident old men at the bar, but your date doesn't seem to care. They tell you about the cat meme page with a billion likes that they're the admin for. You share a love of pinball, and bond over the *Scared Stiff* machine.

You go back to their house. It dawns on you that this is their parents house, and their room is their childhood bedroom, when you see their name spelt out in cute letters with giraffes hanging off them on the bedroom door. There's that whirring computer setup again, and the sweaty carpet smell. You wonder if your old room used to smell like this. You sit down on their bed, making eyes. You put your handbag down, kick off your heels, and ask where the bathroom is.

They ignore the question, change the subject, put on *Rick & Morty*. This seems odd, so you wait a few minutes then bring it up again. They finally give you directions, but with a weird embarrassment in their voice. A kind of shame. You wonder what's going on here.

You pad quietly down the dark hall. The bathroom is kind of gross, but it's no big deal. You sit down and pee and wonder what their deal is. The shower curtain is pulled across. You feel a need to open it.

Their bathtub is covered in blood. Lashings of it, from one end all the way to the other. It looks violent. The blood has turned brown, seems to be weeks old.

You figure it can't possibly be what it looks like. You don't leave in terror as any normal person in a hypothetical situation like this would. You go back and ask "What the fuck's with the bathtub?", like it's a flippant remark. They evade the question again, turn back to *Rick & Morty*; the interdimensional cable episode. You wait for the episode to end then you bring it up again. They pull out their phone and write a draft SMS: *"It has to do with dad and I would rather if you weren't aloud about it."*

Having come this far, you fool around anyway. You wonder how someone gets to 24 without knowing how to play with tits. They're like a child, and believe it or not, they end up politely kicking *you* out. You want to fuck, they don't.

You walk home, through the warehouse district. You wanted to be taken advantage of, but had the tables turned on you. You feel as you've accidentally preyed on someone whose development somehow stopped at 15. But how could you have known? You try not to think about the bathtub.

They come out as non-binary six months later. They look great, actually. You help them out with support networks and some paperwork issues, then finally work up the guts to ask about the bathtub. They say their sick dad had a horrible health condition in which they had to drain open wounds in there. This makes sense, but you explain that it was fucking terrifying to come across a bathtub covered in blood at a guy's house on a first date. They are apologetic, genuinely mortified.

It never occurred to them to see it that way.

And this is so much of the problem with cis men. Not so much that they are dangerous, which they also are, but that they are oblivious to how dangerous they are coming off to us. And that they usually aren't men at all.

Joel is teaching you to make coffee. He's really cute, big arms and podcasty demeanour, makes you fold in on yourself. He keeps talking about the grinder, double shots, and how to use your "dominant hand." You want to be thrown over the espresso bar and pumped.

You get talking. You realise that the crush you're developing on him must be similar to those that cis women developed on the old you. You look down on him in a nice way. He thinks he's Aladdin showing you the world, and you let him think that. Sometimes it's nice to feel like Jasmine for a while— small and swept up in testosterone's unchecked enthusiasm. It's nice to talk to someone who wasn't raised to be polite. For a while.

"Ventura Highway" comes on in the background and you both have a moment. He loves this song and you do too.

You get in his car, accept a lift to the city, knowing full well he's just one of those car people and this will take up more of your time if anything. He talks about cameras for half an hour and you lick it up, enjoying the tone of his voice when he's enthusiastic about something. He says terrible, ignorant white guy things too, has really dumb opinions, but... you want to tolerate him, you know he can't help it. He's like a puppy; he doesn't know any better. You make plans to go over to his house a few days later.

When he says he'll pick you up from Leppington station, you don't realise the sheer gravity of where that is, nor that he lives not nearby but on a farm 20 minutes drive away. He fails to mention that he lives in a little shack on his parents' farm, and that there is no way out of there without a car. He's kind of doing this "off the grid" thing and you think well, here I am, and I hope I can trust him. You think you can. You want to be a spontaneous person. You want to be a good little slut.

He's showing you his things and they're nice things. He's really into his stuff and it's cute. You take the beers out of your backpack. The next thing you know, this guy is literally polishing a hatchet in front of you. "The ultimate hatchet," he says, tells you he made it himself, has been forging it for weeks.

I mean, he lives in the woods, so it's not totally out of place. But he's got a woman alone in his house, his *farm* house, and he's showing off his hatchet. You wonder whether he is actually dangerous or just, again, oblivious to womanhood, completely unaware that we're mentally preparing an escape route at all times for a situation just like this one. Sitting next to the hatchet is a polaroid of himself, his own face scratched out in pen. "That's my autograph," he says.

You fool around, suck his medium-sized dick, but he doesn't want to fuck you. He's also behaving in increasingly manic ways. He gets really into some things then suddenly stops. But it's a nice night for a while. He pulls out a goddamn lap steel guitar and sings "I Can't Help It" to you and it's such a nice gesture that it makes you cry. But he stops at the second verse, drops the instrument completely and moves on to another conversation topic, as if this sweet little

interlude never happened. Later you both dance naked to “Little Red Corvette” playing off his big TV, and then collapse in a big heap. You try to forget about the hatchet but you can feel its presence, haunting the room. Then he drops it: “You know, I always had this image of myself walking through a portal and becoming a woman. It’s a recurring dream I’ve had since I was a kid. Do you think I’m just in denial?”

Motherfucker. This again. How was it even possible, or statistically likely? You didn’t meet online-- you met in a perfectly wholesome, rom-com-friendly way, like a real person is supposed to. Plus, you hit on *him*. You sigh, start going through the introductory spiel again, the familiar words tired and limp. You feel used.

Then this: “You know, you really shouldn’t have come here alone without telling someone the address,” he says. “You never know what could happen.” You freeze. You tell him you’re leaving, and calmly start putting your clothes on. In your eyes, his body has turned into a giant cartoon hatchet. You’re in emergency mode, moving slowly, calmly. You open the Uber app. He understands, seems ashamed of himself.

He walks you to the road to wait for it to show up. It is pitch black outside. “You should come have dinner with my parents sometime,” he says, looking idly at the lights of his parents’ house next to his. “That’ll really freak them out.”

The Uber shows up after ten agonising minutes. You watch the headlights roll down the dark, rural road.

“What are you gonna do tonight?”, he asks.

“Writing,” you say. “I think I’ll try and write some things.”

“Oh, what are you writing about?”

You, you think to yourself. This. People like you. This thing that always happens. You as the last straw, the last cis guy I am trying to fuck for the foreseeable future. This would probably all be easier if I didn’t have a dick, but then I’d just have to deal with your bullshit longer. If I do get rid of it, it won’t be for you. You creeps aren’t getting anywhere near my hypothetical pussy. I’ve had enough of you lot— this sickness, this danger, this repression. They say we’re confused? You’ve been so coddled for so long that your brains are all fucked. It’s not worth it. The most confusing part is that you’re probably not even a guy! On some level I’ve probably put myself in this terrifying situation just for the material, and I hate myself for it. But someone needs to write this down. It should be something.

“Just trans stuff,” you say, smiling, and get in the car.

Your driver’s name is Mitch. You’re glad to see her.

Eventually, you make it back to Town Hall station, pacing the platform anxiously, processing what just happened to you and what could have happened to you, and wondering how much of it is your fault. You close your eyes and your mind throws up a screensaver-- little hatchets with wings, flying from the top left to the bottom right, buzzing like flies.

That's when some guy fucking messages you on Grindr. *"I can see you on platform 4. look like u're about to have a nervous breakdown. U need a place tonight?"* His display picture is a snake. You block him and look around, mildly terrified, trying not to look as if you're looking around. You uninstall Grindr.

Then someone else messages you on OKCupid. *"Hey."* Just a harmless cis dude. But you're at wits end and snap at him anyway. *"You're fucking trans, aren't you?"* Ten minutes later, he writes back: *"I will admit, the times I've worn a dress haven't made me feel worse."*

Your girlfriend's waiting for you when you finally get back into your own bed at 2:30 in the morning. She stirs, growls, reaches for some water and drops half a tab of Viagra taken out of your top drawer. Reflexively. She pins you, sucks on your tits and keeps a firm hand pressed into your lower stomach. No words are exchanged. You're purring like a kitten. You're getting topped tonight. You manage to flip yourself around and offer up your hips. She takes the library copy of *Whipping Girl* from your bedside table and literally whips you with it, makes you whimper. Then she enters you, hitting your spot perfectly. She feels amazing. Everything feels right. It's good to be home. For now.

Seven

Love on Top

“You won’t believe what’s about to happen,” I said to my choir girlfriends, who’d just given me a lift after rehearsal. “I’m about to get out of this car and ring that doorbell. My voice is about to go up around two octaves, and I’m about to become a different person. See you later.” I opened the door and rang for Michael’s apartment, one of my heels slipping in the gentle rain. I watched oil in puddles in taffeta patterns, running down the drain. He answered. “Hello?”

“Hey.” My *real* voice. A higher and softer tone, sultry, all traces of cynicism and bitter boyishness instantly gone. He gets it. He gets to have me. “Hello sweetheart.” The door buzzed open, and I smiled.

I should tell you about how we met. Earlier in the year, I became the first and only trans girl in the all-female Cheap Sluts Choir. Their logo is a vagina with a pierced heart for a clit. I’m still the newest member, so I don’t have the balls to complain about it yet. When I first auditioned with Amy Winehouse’s “I Heard Love is Blind”, they loved the idea of me and possibly also me. I’m very useful to them because my voice is by far the lowest, which I have mixed feelings about. On one hand, I hate my old voice and have tried hard to get rid of it. On the other, I can nail that bass hook thing in Ginuwine’s “Pony.” It’s exhausting trying to talk in one voice and sing in another, so the Cheap Sluts are the only ones who get to hear me talk deep.

Sassy is the choir schtick, red and black the colour scheme. We do “I Touch Myself” and “No Scrubs”, stuff like that. It’s all a bit laboured, appropriative, and very white girl feminism but it’s fun and I try not to overthink it. It’s nice feeling accepted. When they’re all chatting among themselves, I can tell they’re having the kind of conversations you only have when there’s no boys around and that’s always going to be a lovely sound to me.

We play a lot of corporate gigs, weddings, functions and the occasional support slot for some medium-sized indie act. The name attracts people who are looking for an edgy side dish for the bottom third of the bill. Once we played this bizarre event called 'Breastkiville 2016', some breast cancer awareness thing at the Erskineville Town Hall. I kept wanting to say "Breastival," but there was a K in there and a LLE as well. A festival, about breasts, in Erskineville. They were going for a three-way portmanteau and it just didn't really work. The whole thing was a bit like that.

As with many of our bookings, the organisers had more government funding than they knew what to do with. We got a lot of money out of it but it was a logistical nightmare. The foldback speakers were set up but turned off entirely. Someone went to the effort of renting and setting up all this gear, then just let it sit there. It was like a film set. So we all had to go in raw in a room with terrible sound, just looking around and trying to remember our places from memory, hoping the closest girl knew what she was doing. We always close with Beyonce's "Love on Top" and it's actually pretty spectacular when we get it right. Four key changes! I cringed so much as we tried to keep that together without hearing each other, but somehow it apparently still sounded good.

Afterwards, I started mingling on the floor of the event among all these seasoned lesbians and socialites. The scene was instantly anxious and claustrophobic, but I wanted the booze. They'd brought in this caterer called "primalFOODS." They only did meat, but like, weird meat. I took a gin and tonic in a plastic cup with a small tomato floating in it off a passing tray and slipped through the crowd to find entire kangaroos laid out, heads intact, horribly burnt, wearing Melbourne Cup-style fascinators for some reason, being picked apart by queer veterans bragging about being at the original Mardi Gras through mouthfuls of flesh.

The scene was ghoulish. The "canapes" that were circulating turned out to be bone marrow, crumbed sheep brain, and crackers spread in ant butter. I overheard one lady who only found out she was eating brain mid-chew. I saw the look on her face. There was someone else who had the nerve to complain to the circulating water that she had been left holding the marrowless bone too long, citing "the first rule of hospitality." I kept drinking, trying to block all this out. I grabbed a handful of single-origin beers out of the cooler and stashed them in my handbag. There was so much food and so much alcohol that they were suddenly desperate to get rid of it. Like, actively hustling it, uncomfortably barging in on conversations like those charity street people, except trying to get us full on weird meat and drunk on artisan cider for free. I felt like I'd stumbled into the banquet in *Brazil*, like I'd accidentally joined the 0.01%.

All this at a breast cancer awareness event. It was madness. Yet I was uncomfortable to express my discomfort to the other choir girls. It felt intuitively offensive to complain about a free banquet, plus my internalised imposter syndrome was still telling me I should be grateful to have been allowed into an all-female context at all. None of them seemed to think there was anything wrong with all of this. I spotted Lucy and Brooke from the soprano section, casually laughing between mouthfuls of spine.

That's when I saw Michael. Our eyes met accidentally and I just got a vibe. I not only felt deeply at ease with his essence in a way I found hard to articulate, but I also had a hunch that I'd be allowed to be cynical around him, too. I gestured vaguely and everything and said "What the fuck's with all this?" I figured there was maybe a 50% chance he'd turn out to be a TEDx trendoid who'd bust out into some kind of "Let's have a Challenging Conversation about the Philosophy of these Food Concepts" rhetoric. Instead he blinked at me like a spark and said something akin to "I don't know" and "A friend dragged me to this" that told me I'd run into the right guy.

I'd sworn off cis guys, but I just felt there was something special about him and thought I'd give him a shot. It turned out he wasn't a guy at all, nor another repressed trans woman, thank fuck. He's gender neutral, and when he finally confided this in me after a few weeks of dating it explained so much. What is that quality of just *not being cis* that makes such a big difference? He was just... decent, and nice to me, and understanding of sensuality, in a way that cis men simply are not. And I wondered what was up with that. I must have known from the start.

I honestly don't remember much more of that night we first met. Both of us kind of made a little nest for ourselves and I got much drunker. He was about ten years older than me and had this kind of Dumbledore smile that kept making me giggle. I gave him my number - old fashioned charm - and looked him up on Facebook. That's when I realised he was the same Michael who had dated my trans acquaintance, Chloe, for a long time up until recently.

Chloe was the first proper trans friend I ever had. When I first started to figure out what my deal was, I ended up in some Facebook group with like a hundred people in it and posted the first photo of myself in a dress. I wrote some timid, adorable paragraph underneath about beginning to discover myself. She just straight up messaged me as a stranger and told me that we were now friends, told me as a matter of fact that we were going to meet for coffee in the next week or so, that she was going to give me the rundown about hormones and how to get on them and how everything works. I've done this for a few other new girls since, and I'll never forget that she did it for me.

I met her only one other time, soon after her and Michael broke up. She was taking it very hard and put a general Facebook call out for anyone who wanted to cuddle. I went over to the Castle Hill apartment she randomly lived in, away from everyone, and refused to move out of. Her room was saturated in bright pink and coral blue. Her bedpost had a leash hanging off it. I just spent some time with her, held her, listened to chiptune and her feelings. She always wore these big, circular reflective sunglasses, like mirrors, even at night. She'd sit on her balcony and kind of stare off into the distant lights. That day she also gave me a Janet Jackson T-shirt that she said she couldn't wear without feeling sad anymore. Now I'd just chatted up her ex. I found a Facebook photo of the two of them on a train, her wearing the exact shirt that I now owned.

I think I underestimated how down with non-monogamy a lot of trans people really are. I messaged her about it, said I didn't realise it was the same Michael and that I wouldn't see him if it hurt her feelings. She was just like *Nah dude, go for it!* She insisted on calling everyone dude, an affectation which is kind of appealing in a trans woman. I honestly think she was happy to see him with someone she could trust. So I did. I went for it alright.

He lived in Kings Cross, just near Kellett St. On our first date, he took me out for dinner on the night they took all the letters off the neon Coke sign. The letters sat in a big white curvy pile on a shop awning, like they'd been shaken off in an earthquake. We were on the way back to his house when we came across it. The blank, dark redness made us feel unsettled in a way that was hard to articulate. This damn thing had blasted out the word COCA-COLA over William Street for our entire lives. It was *our* eyesore. The sign came back eventually, in LED and brighter than ever. But seeing this monster go blank for a night was like a sign of the world about to end. That was the moment I first held his hand.

He'd had a rough life of some kind, before me. He'd drop in certain details every now and then. Rural Queensland, horrible small-town stuff. "I've been in the backseat of a car burning through open country," he once said, "being drunk driven by an underage cop." That story made me show him *Wake in Fright*. Fuck, there was something hot about that. Watching that nightmare, snuggled up with his big, warm form. "It's mostly accurate," he said after, "but the drunk can't shoot that well."

He had a tonne of job stories too, lots of great Sydney content. He'd worked for a long time as a bouncer at O'Malley's, the horrible Irish backpacker dive near William Street. All the breaking up fights and ejecting the unruly turned me on in a weird way, more than I wanted to admit. He'd also been a truckie for a few years. Once, when a boss kept abusing him over the radio, he calmly parked the truck on Parramatta Road, got out, pitched the keys onto the roof of a mattress warehouse and went to the pub. "Never heard from them again" he said, proudly. "Dunno what happened to the truck."

When we dated, he was working as a train guard. I really like trains. He hates them, because of work, but it sort of evens out in an odd way. I mentioned how Sydney Trains had been doing this thing where they were phasing out the word *passengers* and replacing it with *customers*. He was the only person I've ever met who found this as annoying as I did. He said he refused to say customers, no matter what. His passionate defence of fare evaders, also on our first date, made my heart swoon.

"A train carries passengers," he said. "They're people, human beings. We're all in on the journey together, as a train. Some of us don't pay; they are not customers. And I respect those people just as much as everyone else!" This was my heart eyes emoji moment, the second I decided I definitely wanted to fuck him.

One time I happened to catch the train he was on, and he let me into the guard compartment. I rode with him from Sydenham to Town Hall. At one point he held me out the side of the train as it flew between stations, holding me tight. I mean. That is romance in my books. I was pretty into him at that point. It was my *Titanic*.

There was one morning I woke up with him and he hurried on his way to a costume shop to buy a pirate outfit. That night he was going to one of his roleplaying things as a vampire who had misunderstood the party description and showed up as a pirate. Something like that. I never understood this part of his life, but I loved hearing about it. I heard him on the phone once, telling somebody that they were banned from the roleplaying clubhouse for a year for taking a swing at somebody else during an argument. His arm was around me in bed the whole time. He was so gentle with the other person, reasonable, yet insistent. Good at negotiating. I once heard that people are at their purest as they react to their first sip of coffee in the morning. It was sort of like that. People are always at their most attractive when they're not trying to be.

He gave me one of his business cards once. The back was written in runes. The front identified him as, among other things, a wizard. I keep it in my wallet. He sure is a wizard. He never really seemed to want or need to use his dick, and I didn't mind. His hands are magic, and I'd often let him choke me. In truth, I begged for it. I'd go limp and trust him completely, and he'd always know exactly when to stop. There's a system, he explained to me once; he'd watch for cues from my entire body, telltale twitches from my neck, my chest, my arms. I felt safe hearing this, but wished I hadn't seen behind the curtain. I'd let him do most of the work because he liked it like that. But every now and then I'd dig my nails into his back and cherish every rare moan, the bass frequencies. I'd feel small. I'd completely forget about my past.

There was this one time he went down on me, softly, gently, nibbling, using his tongue exactly right. Fleetwood Mac's "Worried Dream" was on in the background, his blues playlist on shuffle. I was so alive, so receptive. It felt so right that I started to cry gently. This was one of those moments where I thought, God almighty, I'm actually going to have to do it. I'm going to have to get twenty thousand dollars together and probably fly to Thailand. On the ninth floor of an office building in Bangkok, I will be anaesthetised and a man will take surgical equipment and slice my dick open, invert it, make it into what it should always have been. I will need to spend weeks in hospital, and dilate for two to three hours a day for several months. Routine surgery. But so upsetting. In that moment I was a kind of happy, but also so scared, so sad. He looked up at me, asked if I was alright. I nodded. He knew crying was mostly good.

Another time, he spanked me so hard that I cried again. Adrenaline rush. He knew exactly how to space it out, how to start softly and gradually speed things up, make things more intense, more even. His timing was flawless. He'd get sounds out of me I didn't know were possible. When it finally got to be too much I curled up in a ball in his arms, shaking, crying. He was used to this happening. I loved that he was used to it. There were few other times in my life I'd felt so exposed, so safe.

"Sometimes I wonder what the hell kind of a life this is", I said, finally getting some words out. "Why did this have to happen to me?" I was set off again and he tightened his arms. I could feel him breathing, softly. "They don't know. They think I'm some sort of fashion statement, something up for debate. I just wish they knew. People don't see moments like this."

"No," he said, as he stroked my hair. "They don't."

Eight

Rated X & Summer Night

"I've got hundreds of stories, mate," said Lex, "and all of them end the same way: someone covered in shit."

I met Lex, short for Alexei, on OKCupid. He used to live up in Byron Bay and work for the council handling "feedback" for the sewerage department. His trademark work anecdotes were always so short and sharp. "Lady up in Mullumbimby, yeah? Sat down in an outhouse, when it suddenly *exploded up into her*. Some bloke in Alstonville, worked as a vet. Heard a rattling on one of his pipes, tapped on it with a wrench. Next thing you know? He's *copped a face full of it*." He could go on and on with these stories and make me giggle endlessly, like he was playing peek-a-boo with a baby.

Lex is a trans dude and a recent celebrity. We had a really hot thing for a couple months. I was a rebound for him, and that was more or less okay with me. He was pretty open about the fact he was recovering from an abusive relationship, and I respected that. I did get clingy and kind of mess it up, but the bigger problem was that we were basically opposite people.

I mean, we were adorable together. He tended to have drugs on him, so the dodgy cunt would always meet me at Macdonaldtown station instead of Newtown and we'd go hang out in Hollis Park. That's the weird, quiet one hidden behind the train line that the cops don't go to. There you'd see me, six foot, in a cute floral maxi-dress and a heart necklace, cuddled up to a five foot two dude with a mullet, covered in tattoos, rocking a flanno over a torn-up black singlet with Carl Sagan on it, constantly chain-smoking and drinking longnecks of VB. I drank a lot of VB during our thing. "Don't try to match me," he'd say. "Seriously. It won't end well. I'm a Russian on

testosterone.” He was always right, and he’d scold me like a mean daddy every time I woke up with an out-of-my-league hangover.

The talking head who kept showing up as the token trans voice on TV panel discussions was not the Lex I knew. He was sick of the media, sick of being gawked at and asked to explain himself. He was at the point where he just didn’t give a fuck, was straight up taking the piss out of the people who adored him. You had to know him like I did to realise how much he was struggling not to laugh during his keynote address at the Broome Writers Festival, for which he was paid in four figures. It’s on YouTube with a couple thousand hits. “I am a trans person-- that is to say, a trans man”, he says, while cameras flash and click at him. “This means that there was a time in which I lived as a woman, but now, I no longer do. Today, I am the man I have always known myself to be. That man, who is me, was inside me all along. Now, when I look in mirrors, I see that man. When I see him, I know and feel that he is male.” On and on he went, running out the clock.

On our first date, Lex and I ended up fucking on top of a grave in the Camperdown Memorial Park cemetery in Newtown. Sydney tradition has it that the general courtesy you’d normally extend the dead does not apply to this particular place. Ask anyone-- it’s common knowledge that you can do whatever you want in there, and everyone’s had sex in there at least once as a teenager. I figured doing it during second puberty was better than not doing it at all. There’s even one particular grave you’re supposed to fuck on: Sarah. Go in there and you’ll find her, towards the back, with the church behind you, near the fence, roughly in the middle. She’s in a chest tomb which you can easily lie down on top of. You’ll be exactly where I was when Lex held me down and rode my cock like a champ. Have fun. Think of me.

In 2015 he published *Dudewakening, or Why I’m No Longer Talking to Cis* People About Gender*. The maddening title came entirely from his publisher, complete with the asterix leading to a helpful definition of “cis” on the front cover. For the Average Reader. It all came about from a blog post of his that went viral and randomly caught a publisher’s eye. I read it before I met him, just like I read every other trans memoir I could get my hands on. It was a really lovely book, and it made me cry a few times. The second-last chapter went hard on Russia’s LGBT policies, and was so furiously on point and widely circulated that the embassy issued him a formal lifetime travel ban by mail. That now hangs proudly framed in his messy room, alongside an unpaid fare evasion fine issued to him at Medvedkovo station during his last trip to Moscow as a teenager.

There are lots of interesting things you could talk to him about, but people don’t seem to want to talk to him about those things. He’s done so many interviews and profile articles now and they all boil down to “You are trans. Tell us about that.” It was if every article, in examining him, took some of him away. It reminded me of that line from *Harry Potter*: “My eyes aren’t glistening with the ghost of my past.” Some of them even mistakenly identified him as a trans woman. People will do that in internet comment sections, too: more than a few times, people have said “You’ll

never be a real woman.” I mean, a few times I’ve had people say to me “You’re doing a bad job of trying to look like a dude” so I can relate. If you’re going to be a bigot, at least get it right.

Sometimes, late at night, he would tell me about everything, about where he had come from and the darker things he’d had to leave out of his public image, about how he had found himself being perceived and how that related to who he really was. How so much of it came down to looks, as it so often does. “This is how the cis get you,” he once said, “They kill you with fascination. They’ll make you tell your transition story over and over again, until it’s all you can think about. They’ll even pay you for it. I keep getting money out of this that I can’t possibly turn down and it’s driving me crazy.”

He’d talk to me about music too, about Native Cats and The Cannanes, “Dentaku” by Kraftwerk and “Underwater Boy” by Virna Lindt. He had a weakness for the musical *Rent* and told me he’d once played Angel, which I found difficult to imagine. His favourite Elvis song also happened to be “Bossa Nova Baby.” He’d just weave these playlists in his head. I’d felt so privileged to have him open up to me, not least because his speaking voice was just so sexy and raw. Sometimes I’d get sleepy and I’d tell him so, snuggled into his arm. “You can sleep,” he’d say, “but I must go on.” And he really would. Just musing to himself, into the night. Narrating my dreams. I mean, it felt nice, but this probably would have become obnoxious eventually. Still, this was the person who was never on Q&A.

The opposite would happen, too. When he spoke in front of kids and teenagers, I’d see a lightness of spirit that he never let on when we were alone, and it was if he also really was that person from Q&A after all. I tagged along to a speaking engagement he had at a primary school and saw that he had become someone else again. It was so obvious how important his activism was to him, the real difference he was making, the impact his presence had on young people in ways that might not become fruitful for years and years. It was obvious he was great with kids. But he didn’t want to talk to me about any of that.

I also noticed this kind of mutual jealousy, a kind of gender-related animosity, that subtly started to brood between us. It started off as jokes: “You can have *my* boobs!” “I *wish* I could give this ass to you!” “If I die in a car crash, you can have my dick!” After a while I came to suspect that these weren’t really jokes, that they were masking something emotionally very serious, an animosity neither of us wanted to articulate because it made no logical sense. I also wondered how often this happens when trans women date trans men, whether it contributes to an undoing of things.

Most of our dates were basically the two of us getting pissed in parks, listening to music on his tinny phone speakers. I heard that *Suburban Lawns* album a lot. “*Oh, my genitals!*” “Jam the Controls” was my favourite. Just over a minute long. Just try to keep track of the bass and the chords in that thing. It’s nuts. I had a feeling it sounded like “That Lady” by the Isley Brothers. I played it to him but he didn’t get it, had no idea what I was talking about. I still swear I can hear it. They’ve chucked “That Lady” into an evil blender.

I'd spend a day with him and smell like smoke for two days. I'd wake up at 7am, he'd tend to get up at 2pm. I tried to influence him to go on adventures and bushwalks with me, and he enjoyed them a lot, just struggled to actually show up to things that he wasn't being paid to do. Once I took him out to Henry Head out at La Perouse, and I showed him the abandoned military forts on the clifftop that overlook the rough seas. We were completely alone out there, watching the shipping traffic, the air traffic, the rescue helicopters heading south to the Royal National Park. We took a lot of nudes. I think those days were really good for him.

Lex and I turned each other onto Miles Davis as well. He was into the really fucked up stuff, like *Dark Magus* and *Agharta*, funky nightmares that were new to me and did my head in in the best way. That song "Rated X" made me feel really hot, reached into my ears and tickled the clit inside my brain. In turn I played him the gentler stuff that I liked just as much, like *1958 Miles* and *Quiet Nights*. My favourite song is "Summer Night". I played him that one at the end of one of our adventure days, as we were sitting up on the rocks at Camp Cove beach after skinny dipping at sunset. Miles' delicate lead line echoed off the remains of a VB longneck that Lex had downed and then smashed in half against the sandstone to use as a makeshift amp.

"That's the thing with Miles," I said. "I've always wondered how he could be who he was and still be this person. It's not just that he was beating his wives. He was totally open about it. He brags about it in his autobiography. Yet, I mean, listen to this. It's the most beautiful, sensitive thing I have ever heard."

Alexei took a drag. "Well, he grew up in St. Louis in the 30s, right? It would have been pretty hard for a man to be open about his feelings in a context like that. Maybe his music was the only outlet he had."

I sat there and thought about that for a minute. I still think about that a lot. Then he started up with his sewerage stories again.

"Once I got a callout to a burst pipe on an oyster farm. I can still smell it in my dreams. Then there was that German tourist down on Shirley St; dropped a cigarette butt into a drainpipe, yeah? Something in there must have been flammable-- *bang*. Zero to showered in it, three seconds. That one made the news." I looked it up and there was the CCTV footage. I turned off Miles and watched it, aghast. It was a five-second clip that looped over and over.

That night we fucked to *Dopesmoker* by Sleep. An hour of the same riff. Much sexier than that sounds.

Believe it or not, I had never smoked weed in my life until I met him. He was a bad influence on me in a very innocent, Archie Comics sort of way that I really liked. I started in the worst way. I was at his house in Petersham, already very drunk, when I smoked a bong for the first time. I started with bongs. *Family Guy* was on, for some reason. I always hated that show, but it

suddenly seemed funny to me. The colours, the light and sound. It all went to my head at once. I immediately collapsed onto Alexei's shoulder and started touching his chest, just running my hands all over it. This was hardly even sexual; I'd merely instantly regressed to the state of a infant.

"Shhhh," he said, patting my head as I babbled wordlessly.

The book said he named himself after Lex Luthor, but I know that he was actually thinking of Lexington Steele, the porn star with the huge dick. I guess I already knew this, but I had never really thought about it before I dated Lex: a strap-on is just as good. It feels the same, and you're lying there, looking up at this babe, fucking you. Your hands are on his lower back, his hard butt; you're feeling it move. He's looking into your eyes. You can hear him growl. You're feeling the energy of him wanting you, wanting to take you, and all of this flowing deeply through this very real thing that he's harnessed to himself. It was all so good. The whole thing made me wonder what my own dick meant to me, what its actual value was, why I couldn't get a pussy and then just wear one of these when I felt like it.

It's not like I was surprised that trans men are men. It was more that I had never been with a man before. I'd dabbled in lots of facets of masculinity, sure, had dated plenty of people who claimed they were men but obviously weren't. But Lex, I realised, was my first real one.

He broke up with me by text. "I don't think I should see you anymore," he said. "I don't know how many more times I should tell you that you shouldn't try to be like me-- I'm not your dad. I also have trouble asserting my boundaries, but I felt really violated by that time you tried to figure out the passcode to my phone. This is completely not on."

I had no idea what he was talking about, then I remembered that day down at Camp Cove, the day we listened to "Rated X" and "Summer Night." I'd picked up his phone to change the music and said "What's the code?" in passing, not giving it a second thought. Suddenly I could picture Lars, the shitty ex he'd allude to sometimes, pouring through Lex's phone while he was in the shower. The "being like me" thing confused me further, and think Lars haunted that sentiment as well. I was okay with being broken up with, but I tried to explain that the phone thing was a misunderstanding, that such a thing wasn't in my heart.

He left me on read for two days. Then I got an email from him, with the first draft of his second book attached. He'd taken up my suggestion. It was not about gender. It was a collection of short stories about people getting covered in shit.

Nine

Dark Eyes

On September 29th, 2016, somebody new moved into the room underneath mine. We passed each other on a quiet night in the narrow hallway, their stripey socks padding the linoleum floor. I had halfway opened the front door just as they were moving quickly into their room.

They had long, straightened hair and heavy eyes anchoring a slender face. They looked like a sad rabbit, cloaked in a thick *Mass Effect* hoodie. We made brief eye contact, maybe got a syllable out each. They moved quickly and closed the door behind them.

I felt strangely affected as I headed up my stairs and heard them gently clear their throat, muffled by the walls. Something about those eyes. I sat on my bed for a minute, just feeling odd.

I thought of that scene in Bob Dylan's *Chronicles, Vol. 1*, where he sees a woman in a hotel hallway and is so struck by her that he just goes and writes that beautiful song "Dark Eyes" out of nothing. I didn't know their name, so I just called them that: Dark Eyes.

I also knew an egg when I saw one.

You start to develop eggdar after about a year, and you're rarely wrong. If you are wrong? It's probably not a big deal because like, surely no genuine cis person is going to be that fucked up by that false diagnosis too much. On the other hand, there's a saying: Don't crack an eggshell unless you want a mess on your hands. You have to be careful, to do it right and let them do most of it. I'm not always good at this.

There have been times when Olivia has sent me a screenshot of a Tinder profile and I've immediately reacted with "HAHA" or "omg poor thing" in a way that wouldn't make sense to anyone cis. The joke is that they're obviously eggs. It's almost too easy to pick them, honestly. One profile was three photos: one of them playing an electric guitar with long hair covering their face, one of them in a hoodie with their feet up reading a book in an empty stadium, again with most of their face covered, and a final one of them dressed as the Log Lady from *Twin Peaks*, looking straight into the camera in a suddenly direct way while clutching a log. Dude, whoever you are, I may not know you but I can tell you this: "Art" is not your name.

The next time Olivia came over, we sat up in my room and excitedly came up with schemes to bring Dark Eyes into our lives. We saw them in the kitchen a handful of times and they almost never spoke. There was a certain sacred quality to the way they glided around the room so minimally, so rarely. They also kept wearing hoodies, which is totally a sign. Seriously, this is a thing-- Repressed trans women wear hoodies. They speak to a basic discomfort with your body. They hide your form, minimise your presence, remove your chest. I can't go near hoodies anymore. I get too many flashbacks.

We figured an offer of weed would be ideal. I never got into it as a teenager, but Olivia was one of those trans women who smoked full-time to make up for her dysphoria before she came out and now held onto it as a comfort thing. Olivia was excited we could share it after I started dating Lex, but it's still a sometimes thing that doesn't do a lot for me.

Around that time I'd also been listening to Imogen Binnie's podcast about cult films. She'd talked a lot about *Sleepaway Camp*, this grimy slasher film from the 80s where a trans girl named Angela goes to summer camp and murders everyone who gets in her way. The main character is openly trans in the film, Imogen said. She has supportive parents, the boys hit on her without feeling weird about it, and none of the campers generally think it's a big deal. All this in a movie from 1983.

I found a big tub of caramel ice cream with walnuts in the back of the fridge, left behind by the guy from the Seychelles who Dark Eyes had just replaced. We found *Sleepaway Camp* on YouTube, rolled some joints, and timidly knocked on their door. It was always so quiet in there. I don't know how they managed to make so little noise, to take up such little space.

They came to the door.

"Hey, uh, we've got some weed and ice cream and we're gonna watch a dumb movie, if you're interested." We felt like Serano's Witnesses.

They looked us up and down for a moment, then shook their head and quietly closed the door.

We watched *Sleepaway Camp* anyway. It seemed too good to be true. 45 minutes and maybe four murders into the film, nobody seemed to be talking about Angela's trans status at all. Even

the bad girls were bullying her in a way that you would maybe bully a trans girl, like threatening to throw her in a pool, but never specifically giving her shit for being trans as such. "We must have just missed a throwaway line at some point," Olivia said. I guessed so, that it must have just gone over our heads when someone said "Hey, this weird girl who keeps killing everyone is trans," and someone else was like, "Oh, that's cool, I respect her identity."

Then it got to the ending. She's decapitated this kid she was about to go skinny dipping with, so they're both naked. Then there's a full-body naked shot of Angela with her dick out. The music swells dramatically to indicate that she has a dick. She's growling and snarling and covered in hair. The camp counsellors look on aghast. Freeze-frame on her screaming face.

"My god, she's a boy!"

The End. We couldn't stop laughing. This whole time we thought we were watching some super wonderful thing full of cis people dying, and it turned out that *SHE HAS A DICK* was the big twist finish. Plus, for some reason, trans women are also werewolves. We couldn't tell whether Imogen Binnie was just fucking with us by making us watch this, or whether she must have seen it while stoned off her tits and remembered it all wrong. Thank God we didn't watch this with Dark Eyes. But we loved it anyway.

Come to think of it, that night we had really, really good sex. Fuck yeah, Angela.

A few days later, on Centrelink payday, I went out and bought a copy of *Nevada*. This made it the first book I had actually paid for in years. I left it at Dark Eyes' door early one morning with no comment, hoping it would speak for itself. Plan B. I could faintly hear them in there, coughing slightly, shuffling around.

When I came home late that night, I found that the door to their room was wide open and all their stuff was gone. I glanced in at the cleared floors, the still air, the window opening onto a brick wall.

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I went upstairs to my room and found Olivia sitting straight up in bed, looking directly at me.

"What year is this?", she said.

"What?"

"What *year* is this." I recognised a creeping edge of disgust in her voice, that you're-such-a-baby tone. This was unlike her. In fact, she sounded eerily like long-gone former lovers who took advantage of the old me. Cruel women who pushed me around.

"I don't... know what you mean?"

She rolled her eyes, infuriated. "What *year* is *throozafrahorozhuer!*" she said, slurring with perfect intention, like she was speaking in tongues.

"I'm sorry. I have no idea what you're saying." I was starting to get scared, afraid I'd hurt her in some way, done something wrong. It took me a while to figure out that this was sleepwalk. She'd somehow fallen asleep with her eyes wide open and all the lights on. That was so like her.

"Honey, I think you're asleep," I said, gentler now I realised I was dealing directly with her subconscious. This only made her madder. She rolled her eyes, as if she had something important to say and I was insisting on being difficult. As if I was an impossible person to get through to. She growled and crashed her head onto the pillow, as if to angrily mock me.

"You don't even know", she said, drowsily. "You don't even know yet."

I tucked her in, turned the lights off.

We laughed about it later. Her assertiveness about nothing. But her words stayed with me.

PART THREE

Prince Can't Die Again

Ten

Heathens

"No pass outs," the lady said, snapping a wristband on me, handing me a pair of high-end headphones and a pocket radio. It was Halloween night on the harbour and the sky was threatening to rain. "Once you're in, you're in for life."

This is such a Sydney thing. Once I went to a show in Melbourne and felt a bit strange, like I was getting away with something. I eventually realised that hours had gone by without anyone trying to enforce some kind of authority on me. I had stood in an aisle for a few minutes and wasn't told to move. I sat down on seats and wasn't told that this was an area I had to leave, some higher class I had to pay more for. I left and came back in, and it wasn't a big deal. I wasn't used to this kind of treatment.

I could imagine that someone from Melbourne could also maybe wildly exaggerate and concoct a wild, spiteful fantasy version of Sydney in which we all sit around in front of the Opera House, mentally jacking off to the harbour, watching opera about the Opera House, vigorously congratulating ourselves.

In late October, I met a trans girl on Tinder named Amelia who said she was a social media intern working on the publicity for *Sydney Opera House: The Opera*. It took a while for her to explain what it even was, and it made for good banter. She said she was having trouble getting any media attention because the whole thing was so convoluted and awkward.

"It's a silent opera about the history of the Opera House," she said, "held on the steps of the Opera House, with the audience sitting facing towards the building. It's kind of like a silent disco. The singers are outside but the orchestra is inside, playing live to an empty concert hall. The singers wear earphones which hook them up to the orchestra, and they watch the conductor off a big-screen live feed they've rigged up at the back of the audience. The audience also wear noise-cancelling headphones and listen to the combined vocals and orchestra, which we're going to broadcast on a low-range FM signal."

Even after I untangled all of that, it still didn't make any sense to me. I would understand applying the "silent disco" concept to the opera if you wanted to make use of a small or unconventional space, but with a big audience in a spot well-equipped for these events, and especially with an actual orchestra, what's the point? One of the best things about outdoor shows at the Opera House is the unique atmospheric sound that the setting allows. This is an advantage, not a problem; why would you cancel it out? Especially in an opera *about the building itself*? The whole thing smacked of design-by-committee, of too much money. Amelia had some free tickets and I really wanted to go. I should add that she was ten years older than me, had moved from Adelaide a few months earlier, and was really cute in a Elizabeth Taylor in *Giant* sort of way.

The organisers said it would all still go ahead in any weather, that there would be ponchos for sale just in case. We both had laptops in our bags and for some reason chose to buy one poncho to keep our stuff dry while neglecting to buy them for ourselves. I think we just didn't want to give them any more money than we had to. We collected our Audio-Technica headphones and a small pocket FM radio tuned to the opera's frequency. Amelia and I were fantasising about rocking up in a boat with a pirate radio transmitter and jamming the signal with either *The Vengaboys Christmas Album* or an unrelated opera. I should mention again that she was adorable, and add that we were getting on really well.

The show was an abomination. You would have thought that the Opera House was the greatest accomplishment of humanity. They literally compared it to the Pyramids, to the world's greatest religious monuments. "*If you worship man, this is your cathedral.*" Settle down, mate. It's just a concert venue in a nice spot. The architect Jorn Utzon was presented as a Christ figure, like Da Vinci or something. Knowing the story somewhat, I couldn't imagine how melodramatic this

would get once he got fired from the project. They were already making it seem like a monumental event as he sketched his initial designs in Mexico. I took the headphones off for a while and found that they actually had speakers going and I could hear everything just as well. It actually sounded better.

There was one point where the "NSW Premier" character sung a speech announcing that the building is going ahead, and other cast members playing an audience applauded. I've heard of play-within-a-play, but this was a *press-conference-within-a-play*, about the venue the play was being held in. It was literally self-congratulatory. The sets were elaborate and constantly shifting, requiring a huge support crew. The whole thing had obviously cost a fortune. There was also an unsettling scene when the Bennelong Point Tram Depot is torn down and the chorus chants *Progress! Progress!* Celebrating the end of trams. I felt again like I was in a Melbourne's cartoon villain idea of Sydney.

Then it started raining, really bucketing, and it all kept going as if nothing was amiss. This was just as a scene obnoxiously pandering to the Australian Common Man began. The performers had to wear singlets and bikinis and act out a summer barbecue, while continuing to sing opera in a downpour. I had to hand it to them for sticking faithfully to the intended pacing. It was like watching torture, a display of utter denial. You'd think it would be illegal or something, like someone was about to hurt themselves at any minute or at least get really sick later on. All this on Halloween night.

Most of the slim audience left. I at least had a cardigan on over my dress; Amelia was only wearing a thin little business shirt that her nipples were starting to show through. We were both shivering and holding back laughter. The fact she was prepared to tolerate this for the story told me she was my kind of girl. I was mostly sitting it out because I felt like it was me vs. it. I wanted the rain to get so bad, to become torrential, to get to the point where they had to throw in the towel before the Opera House even got built within the story. I was rooting for the bad guy. I'd never hated Sydney so much in my life.

We eventually decided to leave after about an hour of the *two and a half hour* show. As we left, I looked up at the building itself and remembered that Prince had played there just a few months earlier. I felt a wave of sadness, a wash of grief. I saw purple. Then I started thinking about other things I'd seen there, going back to when I was a kid. I tried to push my quickly surfacing genuine love for the Opera House down, thinking this wasn't the time or, strangely, even the place to deal with it. I was really hoping to steal the headphones which I thought would cap the night off perfectly. I wasn't going to be sneaky about it, just walk out with them still around my neck like I'd forgotten about them and hope that it was too dark for them to notice. Unfortunately they did. We then went down to the City Extra restaurant at the Quay and ordered schnitzel under the harsh red neon, trying to warm up and process the whole thing.

And we got to know each other. It was all the usual bonding stuff. We had a VB each and the pre-transition photos came out, all beards and dead eyes, leading to the mandatory "No way!"

moment that brings two ladies closer. I said all the things I usually say, told all the stories I usually tell. They were all getting warmed-over and repetitive by this point, but it was just nice to hear all her equivalent anecdotes and look at her pretty face. I felt like I was becoming an actress cast as myself in a stage production about my own life, doing six shows a week.

I held her hand across the table. Twenty One Pilots' "Heathens" played in the background and rain wildly battered the windows. I noticed the departing ferries outside, leaving six white vapour trails in the dark water, as I mentally flagged a few things she said to use when the day came that I wrote about all of this. I never stopped collecting stories, working on my act. I was never sure who I really was or how I felt about myself.

Later that night I was lying beneath her, full girl mode, my wavy hair spread out on the pillow, looking up. She'd absolutely railed me. I wasn't expecting her cock to be so big, so out of proportion to her body. She was five foot two and carrying this huge, thick thing. Her hands and thighs shook as she stroked herself above me. I had that girl face on, the new one, eyes all dewey and lips parted.

As much as I didn't want to think about it, my new sex noises sounded suspiciously similar to the female American porn stars I grew up with. These sounds were really me, but these women were deep in my subconscious from original puberty. I couldn't help being the bedroom equivalent of high school rock band singers who put that Fall Out Boy voice on. *Sometimes it's hard*, I thought, *to tell where Sasha Grey ends and I begin*. I whimpered gently in falsetto, waiting for Amelia's cum. She made a little noise. I drew breath and tensed up, but it was just a false alarm.

There were two clocks above her bed, running to different times. I'd asked her about it as I sat down on the bed and took my shoes off, making big eyes. "It's an installation called *The Perfect Lovers*," she said. "Both clocks start off in sync, then gradually fall out from each other, and ultimately, they both stop." I listened to the ticking hands as my mouth hung open, waiting, watching her tremble.

I could also hear the sound of her bunny, Freckles, his little feet thumping around in the corridor as he ran around in circles. It was another night in another sharehouse, another girl's bedroom, more sex, strange pillows, yet another copy of *Whipping Girl* in my peripheral vision. She even had *A Safe Girl to Love*, which impressed me. Earlier, she'd mentioned that her living room couch had a small family of mice living in it, that the house had agreed to just let them be, and that Freckles had even made friends with them. *Prey tend to get along with prey*, I thought to myself.

That's when her load caught me in the face, warmly rolled out into my open mouth, onto my waiting tongue. I felt her lash out onto my forehead, just brushing up against my hairline. I had no idea how she managed to produce something like that after a year on hormones. She let so

much out. It was like witnessing a miracle, and it covered me, stuck to all my senses. I felt so fucking good that I was shivering all over.

That night I dreamed that I was struggling to hold on to Olivia, cradling her injured form in my right arm, while walking headfirst into a strong wind on a long road. Then in the morning, I woke up to Amelia's touch. I remember this so vividly. She was running her fingers over my stomach, avoiding my tits, until I drew her hand up and begged her softly to play with them. Then we lay there facing each other, a mirror image, touching, our hair intertwining.

I rolled her over into a spooning position and reached for the condoms and lube by the side of the bed. She murmured something, arched her neck back and pushed her ass back into me. She'd run out of Viagra, so I was too sleepy to stay hard inside her for long. We reversed positions and she tried to fuck me instead, but the same thing happened. Neither of us cared. We went back to each other's eyes, to playing with our combined hair, to saying "You're so pretty" over and over.

I think you would have to be a trans woman to fully understand that that morning in particular was some of the best sex I'd ever had.

Amelia and I had just woken up on November 1st, 2016. The U.S. election was a week away, and we were both trying not to think about it.

Eleven

Haven't Met You Yet

Conceited windbag Alain de Botton once wrote a trite book called *A Week at the Airport*, for which he set up a "philosopher's office" in a transparent box at a Heathrow terminal to see what he could observe and learn about human nature. He chose to write almost exclusively about himself. I mean, I've written a whole book about my dick, but at least I'm not Alain de Botton.

On the early morning of November 9th, 2016, I sat at my pen cart in International Departures. I'd been up all night, I was hung over, and I had to walk from Wolli Creek along the Princes Highway and the Tempe Reservoir at 5am to get to work on time. I honestly thought I was going to collapse. I'd never been more tired in my entire life, but with the aid of a soy flat white the size of Taipei 101, I somehow I managed to stay awake and get the pen cart set up.

Since I wasn't allowed to have my phone on at work, I was forced to observe what I could. Emirates flight attendants strutted past me in a group of five, tightly choreographed like an army, baggage rolling and heels clicking in sync. A family of ten said goodbye to a matriarch in a wheelchair who looked impossibly old. A tour guide gave a "conclusion of trip" speech in Korean that I had heard a million times and could recite phonetically by heart. I watched a couple making out heavily, and I lipread *I love you so much*. They gradually, achingly tore apart from each other, only to reveal another couple behind them who were doing exactly the same thing. There was something so cruel and dehumanising about seeing that kind of emotion in bulk. It was like watching the end of *Casablanca* on repeat.

I'd heard every possible joke about pens doing this job, and I'd seen every kind of sadness that there is. The worst kind came from people who weren't excited or lovesick, but who were going

to a bad place for a sad reason and genuinely didn't want to leave. I only saw this a few times. This one guy I could pick as an outlier immediately. He looked shattered in a totally different way. Typical trans girl-- I'd become an expert in sadness. I looked at the departures board and tried to figure out where the guy was going based on flights leaving within an hour. I couldn't pin it down, but I knew nobody could possibly be that upset about going to New Zealand.

That day in November, I saw a woman I will never forget. I spotted her with fifteen minutes to go in my shift. She was wearing a taffeta dress and I liked her immediately. She looked past me, over my shoulder at whoever was leaving and said "Be happy!", jumping up and down a little and smiling hugely. I saw only her half of this exchange. She raised her arms over her head and pointed her fingers down towards her afro to make a heart. When her loved ones disappeared into the passenger-only area, it visibly hit her all at once. Her face crumbled, just totally crumbled, and she wept into a man's shoulder.

I felt deeply certain that she was a beautiful person on every level and it was just too much for me. I closed up the table a minute and went to get coffee from Krispy Kreme, where Michael Buble's "Haven't Met You Yet" was playing while I waited. I always liked that song. I listened to it and I let myself cry, let it all out. They gave me my extra large soy flat white, and my hands shook around the warm serrated cardboard cup. I was so sick of feelings.

I came back to the cart to find that the boss had showed up and was standing around ominously, waiting for me. Her name was Kerrie, and I hadn't seen her at all since the day she hired me. I felt that sinking "called into the principal's office" feeling. She greeted me suspiciously.

I followed procedure as she watched me closely. I wondered what was going on. I packed up all the pens and took everything back into a secret part of the airport that looked like a NASA control room, some crazy top security area I could enter just by saying "Victor Chang" into the intercom. I counted the cash and prepared it all to be banked. Kerrie kept an eye on me the whole time, as if there was something I could possibly do wrong at this point. The suspense was torture. There was that one shift I got complacent and read *Radio Free Albemuth* off a Kindle I tucked into the back of the cart, and I wondered if that had anything to do with it.

After much too long, she pulled out a clipboard. "These are the days that you work," she said, pointing at the valleys in a graph she'd printed out in colour and laminated. "And these are the days that Laura works", she said, indicating the peaks. Laura, the cis woman who does the other days. The one who's much more extroverted than I am. The cis woman with the pretty, passable face.

I thought I should get in first. "I quit." What an absurd thing to fail at. How humiliating to have to have this exchange. I tried to let this go.

She sighed. "I know this is a tough job and the hours are bad." She was half right. "But we have to think about the bottom line."

It was 11am and I was wondering what my next job would be. I was preparing to say goodbye to Departures, to say goodbye to all the goodbyes. I was so tired. I was on my way into the women's bathroom to pee out all the coffee when I heard a kid say *Why is that man wearing a dress*. I tensed up and turned around, only to find that the kid hadn't noticed me at all. Then I remembered I wasn't even wearing a dress. The kid was referring to a Muslim man in a thawb on his way out of the men's.

I sat down, peed, and turned my phone on mid-stream for the first time since the early morning. The speakers overhead were playing an awful James Taylor song from the 80s, "Going Round One More Time." It echoed off the porcelain as my reception kicked in. Then a message came up from Olivia. I still have the screenshot:

"Trump won Ohio."

I got out of the stall and started washing my hands, when I glanced up and spotted the reflection of a balding head and a trace of wiry glasses above a stall door. *Oh no*, I thought. I was the only other person in there. I had a sinking feeling. I turned the tap off and stood there, listening. Right on cue, just as I was dreading, was the unmistakable sound of soft panting and jacking off.

I stood there and collected myself for a second. *Why did this have to happen to me?*, I thought, not for the first time. I let myself have a moment while this creep fapped on and on. He peeked over the top again, and I made eye contact with him in the mirror.

I opened the door, found security, and told them there was a man in the women's bathroom.

Twelve

A Dream Goes on Forever

By mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve, the dog and cat adoption fair was down to the very dregs. I thought it so typical of the Animal Shield Foundation to hold an emotionally loaded event like this such a day. I walked around the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre half an hour before closing time, taking in empty cage after empty cage. The few animals that did remain were all visibly tired and fed up after a full day of being played with and gawked at, and I couldn't help but wonder if they also the ones that weren't cute enough to have been adopted.

It was a tragic scene, but you wouldn't have known from the way Zoe and Julia were reacting. The bright-eyed teenage trans girl couple tagged around behind me, squealing at every sleepy kitten and weary puppy, making the best of a bad situation without even realising that's what they were doing. It was as if they were in a completely different reality, walking in a world without sadness. I felt lightened by them.

I'd met them months ago at the Trans2038 support group, and I hadn't seen either of them since Valentine's Day. They'd moved to Melbourne in April after some unspecified shit went down and started making a new life for themselves down there, which, I hate to admit, always seems to work out for people. The two of them were back in town over Christmas to consult with Dr. George Evans, one of the few surgeons in the country who does sex reassignment. They were super enthusiastic to catch up with me and I felt almost guilty about it, like I'd committed personality fraud and become something in their minds that I really wasn't.

We went down to the Golden Plover vegan restaurant on King St, the place that famously does the \$6.50 all-you-can-eat and is always full of students. Neither Zoe or Julia used Facebook

much - something about avoiding families - so I heard all about everything that had happened to them since they moved as I drank tap water out of a cup stained with somebody's old lipstick.

They'd moved into a sharehouse full of queers out in Nunawading. Julia had kept up her creativity and was now sporting a giant tattoo on her left arm of GenderGirl, the trans superhero of her own making, whose personal logo was the female symbol combined with the one for infinity. Zoe had kept herself busy with embroidery and sex work, which she really enjoyed. Sparrows flew around our table with impunity, and I noticed white birdshit caked onto the yellow tiles. In the background, I heard a weird panflute instrumental cover of Todd Rundgren's "A Dream Goes On Forever." I pulled my phone out hurriedly and opened Shazam to figure out who the artist was. Olivia would love to hear this. Not long ago, she'd made me a playlist that was just ten different covers of "A Dream Goes on Forever." "Go ahead," I said to them, feeling bad I had my phone out while they were speaking to me so earnestly. "I'm listening." I was.

They'd just booked a date for Julia's surgery earlier that day, Zoe said, and made the initial deposit. They'd had to play all kinds of legal loopholes against each other to arrange it while she was still underage, but it was finally happening. Zoe was paying for it with her sex work money and Julia was chipping in from a retail job that she had. Maybe that's why they were in such a good mood, but then they were always a bit like that. I was so happy for them, but I worried about them too. I loved them both and hoped dearly that their relationship would work out, hoped that it was what it appeared to be. I poked at the seemingly custard-based dessert, which had grown a crust, with a fork that was also faintly encrusted with something.

Julia took the manila folder with the paperwork from her consultation with Dr. Evans out of her Adventure Time backpack and handed it to me. "A Dream Goes on Forever" continued, the one track looping on repeat, as the CD skipped and glitched. Nobody seemed to notice. Shazam came up blank and later I tried to google "panflute Todd Rundgren" and got nothing. But I tried my best to tune all that out as I filed through these documents, taking photos of the pages for reference later.

I took as much of all this in as I could. It was all so clinical, so straightforward. It described the procedure in ordinary, unromantic terms, set it all out, what it would cost, what the risks are and what aftercare would be like. Routine surgery. It made me feel funny because it all sounded so nice. I felt my hands weaken, my sense of touch diminishing. I felt something deep inside me stir and change, straight from the gut.

I loved topping, loved sex with a dick, loved looking down and seeing this big thing struggling to confine itself in panties, loved being someone who angered so many bigots just by existing in this form. I loved what it was to be a dickgirl and I wanted to stay that way. I mean. I thought so. I was pretty sure I did. And yet. What was this feeling? Butterflies, but not quite. More urgent. Visceral, like an anxiety, a relief, an immense sickness. It sounded nice. It sounded like a nice thing. Maybe it would be nice. Maybe I'd get it done after all. Not that I had any money. Where

would I even get the money? How many pens would I have to sit there with? Now even that was gone. I didn't even have a job anymore.

"The thing is," Julia said, in her tiny voice, "that I worry that even this won't be enough." She stirred her generous serve of chickpeas around absently with a fork; they were gluggy and stale. "I just wish I was cis. That's what I really want. More than anything else, I just want to be cis."

"But you're a trans woman," I said, attempting to rise to the occasion. It was my turn to be mother duck. "You always will be a trans woman. That's you. And that's a wonderful thing to be. You should be very proud of it. You should cherish and appreciate who you are, no matter what you decide to do. You wear your womanhood so well-- you're proud of it, you never take it for granted. I can tell just by looking at you. Plus you're going through one of the hardest things a person can go through, and you're killing it." I hoped I was pulling it off. "You're so wonderful to be around, so inspiring to me. You're one of the people I've met who make me realise I have absolutely no interest in passing, or being cis, or any of that junk. You're perfect this way."

"You think so?", she said, quietly.

"Absolutely. And you know what? Whether it's from me, or from your amazing girlfriend, or whoever else, you can count on a level of understanding and support that most people never even get to feel. We'll always be around in some form, always seeking each other out, always helping each other. We find each other. That's trans people-- what we do, what we've always done, what we live for."

I was on a roll, reaching some kind of fever pitch as the staff emptied the scraps bin, which was well past full and smelled terrible. I could barely tell what I was even saying. I went on and on, talking about being trans, until I lost myself.

I watched the stars from the train during the lengthy stretch of rail between Redfern and Sydenham on the way home. I was churning with butterflies in a way that was hard to shake.

I suddenly realised that I had gone about this whole vagina-decision exercise the wrong way. It was never about sex. Maybe a little bit, but not really. It was about identity. It was about what felt right when nobody else was around. Something about the idea of just, like, washing the dishes, existing in my house, with a vagina? That. That sounds good.

I'd come across many cis lesbians in my time who said things like, "I wish I had a dick." Suddenly, it seemed so obvious to me that they didn't really mean it. Maybe they thought they did, maybe they'd enjoy it for a few weeks, but they'd want to go back. Maybe I was one of them.

People say *The great thing about gender is that you can be free and do whatever you want.* They also say *This isn't a choice.* Both of those things can't be true.

Maybe it doesn't matter what I want. Maybe it's about what I need.

This was an unusually comforting thought.

That night I dreamed of pens.

Victor Chang pens. Pen-plane hybrids. Time lapse footage of Sydney Airport, but with giant flying pens, arriving and departing, all day and night. No curfew. A fountain in the sky, the water made of pens, ascending and descending in a constant stream.

Pens that have Sydney as their only departure point and destination. Taking off and landing again in a perfect loop.

Pens in space, orbiting the Earth, shedding tears. Endlessly circling us. Victor Chang's smile widening on the tail of a giant flying pen, gazing out over the Indian subcontinent.

Then there were the gazers, the passengers, the bystanders. The common people. A businessman with an Victor Chang pen sitting proudly in his top pocket, watching out the cabin window as he descends onto a runway made of pens in Mumbai. A high school kid on her Year 10 field trip, on her way to build a well in an Indonesian village, one of my pens in her immaculate blazer pocket despite the tropical heat. I watched her from the sky as she strapped on a jetpack, took off into the distance and became a pen herself.

I saw a man in the shape of a pen, holding a tissue to his handle, weeping ink into a boarding pass in the pews of a small Santiago chapel during the funeral for an infant. Crying over a tiny open coffin, full of pens. I watched a middle-aged lady wearing a custom-printed T-shirt that says "Karen's Fijian 40th", delayed from her long-awaited flight due to inclement weather, cuddling one of my pens for warmth in an airport budget hotel, while it rains pens outside.

All this, while Imogen Binnie played "A Dream Goes on Forever" on a steel drum with two giant pens, smiling. Behind her was Julia Serano on bass, Casey Plett on drums, and Janet Mock shredding a solo on a pen guitar.

Pens. All bought from me, circling the globe, ending up in landfill, circling the globe again, endlessly. The stuff of life. I was involved, yet I was completely irrelevant. I was what all these people had in common, but I meant nothing to any of them. I was a small part of all of their days. I sold them the pens, but I had nothing to do with the pens. They never spared a second thought for me, and that was as it should be. Besides, I didn't even sell pens anymore.

I woke up on Christmas Day to find out I had food poisoning. My diarrhoea was spectacular. It turned that I'd been tripping balls on nausea the previous night. I could no longer tell if the bittersweet pain in my guts I'd felt then was the vaginal epiphany I'd thought it to be or a literal load of shit.

Olivia caught the 423 up to IGA and returned with orange juice, bread, a jar of Vegemite, the toaster brought up from downstairs so I could make toast without leaving my bed, plus all the usual meds and a big bucket for me to throw up in. Then she went to see her family, told me to text her if I needed anything. She had a family to go to.

High on electrolytes and nausea suppressants, I finally sat down with the *Inside Llewyn Davis* DVD that she had been insisting I watch. It was all about a man with a guitar who seemed to be constantly cold, broke and tired, walking around lost and carrying a cat.

I was delirious and could barely follow it. It didn't make much sense to me. I watched the scene where the cat looks curiously out the train window at all the New York stations going by, the part of the film with that pretty "Fare Thee Well" song in the background. I hazily took in about half of it then fell into another feverish sleep.

Olivia had been talking about this movie for ages. She'd said it was really important I watch it.

I wondered why.

Thirteen

I Feel it Coming

On New Year's Eve, Olivia and I went to Lex's party. He'd painted two North Korean-style, stern-faced portraits of Carrie Fisher and George Michael and hung them above the backyard hot tub. It was a nice touch. They'd both just died within two days of each other, a final kick in the balls as the year began to take on an unprecedented gravity.

The close of 2016 brought a feeling of surreal exhaustion and uncertainty like no other I'd known in my lifetime. Nobody saw any of it coming. Somebody said, "Dignity was the last to leave." Of course, those with less privilege than inner-city white people in developed countries have much worse years, every year, in all kinds of ways. Still, it felt like God was going out of her way to hurt the feelings of a particular kind of person, like she had it in for us for some unknown, unfolding reason.

Donald Trump was about to become the president, and there was absolutely no way of knowing how that would turn out. The scale was "things basically continue as they are" to "he goes crazy and starts a world war", and both seemed just as plausible. Probably more realistically scary was the feeling that irrationality and hatred were making a comeback, that lashing out motivated by fear of the unknown was rising in the consciousness. Then there was my own personal year, full of names, full of feelings. I wanted to sleep for all of 2017, to go into indefinite hibernation. Of course, I'm used to how this all feels now.

Mac McCaughan had a bittersweet song going around called "Happy New Year (Prince Can't Die Again)" that was on Lex's playlist. I wasn't so sure. At 6pm, I sat in the hot tub and listened to it for the first time, Olivia around my arm. There were ten of us in the bubbling water, all

topless, trans, and beer-in-hand, representing the whole spectrum of chest: hormonally full, naturally full, naturally flat, surgically full, surgically flat. This felt like the start of a good night.

Hanalei showed up at 7, appearing in the warm, hard-up kitchen. She'd sworn off the Femme Divine Collective, seemed embarrassed and maybe even a bit shaken by the whole thing, and didn't want to talk about what happened with that. It seemed something bad had happened, and I was also wondering if she'd disavowed womanhood entirely. She was sticking with she/her pronouns but was now insisting on being called Hana, which we tended to call her anyway. She had blue swishy hair now and was visibly more alive as a result. It's as if that was enough to make all the difference, like blue hair dye was her life's equivalent of what estrogen was for me.

By 10:30, Hana and I were upstairs in Lex's terrace bedroom, having really gentle, sweet sex as The Weeknd's "I Feel It Coming" pumped through the floorboards from downstairs. That's a really hot song, especially if you pay attention to what he's saying. It's a song about how consent is hot. It's a guide to best practice when sleeping with someone who's dealing with some past trauma. I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard such an important song about sex. We were having that kind of lesbian-pace sex where you can start, stop, have a friendly chat, start again, stop to play with a cat, start again, etc. "My clit is like a pentagram," she said. "All five areas and the centre trigger their own different sensations." I took the bullet out of a vibe I found in Lex's top drawer and tried it out, teasing each section, one at a time. Sure enough, I got six different sounds, six different responses. The devil herself.

By 11:30, it all started coming undone between us in the pillow talk. She had a special knack of making you feel safe despite yourself, of inspiring you to let out and share things you probably shouldn't. I started telling her about my 2016 and suddenly I couldn't stop. The overwhelm of imagery, the people I'd had to hold it together for. My premature attempts at being mother duck. The trans women who'd come in and out, all my lovers, darting around my life week-to-week. Each week feeling like its own year. Losing all my memories from before transition-- feeling like a ghost lived my life every day before that.

I kept laying it on her: Prince, Dark Eyes, *Nevada*, *Whipping Girl*, Lex, Michael, Mitch, Victor Chang, Sandy, *A Safe Girl to Love*, Parkes, the bathtub coated in blood, *Redefining Realness* and the full moon. It was way too much and my own life didn't sound real to me. It couldn't possibly have all happened so close together, in such rapid succession. To cap it all off, I could hear "Seasons of Love" from *Rent* playing downstairs, that song taking on a newly jarring, mocking edge. Fucking Lex and *Rent*.

Hana's full-beam smile never wavered as I babbled on about my 525,600 confusing, relentless minutes. Her responses to what I was saying were unhelpfully coached in New Age buzzwords and truisms, and were obviously that of someone trying to shake a dark influence on her brain. She was always a bit like that. But I felt like I had to get it all out anyway. I'd lived it all over so many times I felt like I was losing my mind. 2016 went on and on and on.

“Olivia,” she said, stopping me, the way you’d talk to a child who’s getting over-excited. The way you’d talk when you were in over your head. “It’s almost midnight. Let’s go downstairs.”

We did, and found Olivia and Lex making out vigorously on the couch. It was pretty hot. With a few minutes to go, Lex put on Panic at the Disco’s “Impossible Year”, stood up and extended a gentlemanly hand to her. I sat on the stairs and watched them slow-dance together on the Persian rug, in the soft lighting of the living room. It was such a corny and cinematic sight that I can’t believe I really saw it. It made me feel better about everything.

That’s when I realised what my New Year’s resolution was going to be.

Next year, I was going to think, talk and write about gender less. Enough was enough.

In 2017, I was going to move on with my life.

At thirteen seconds to midnight, I pulled the aux cord out and hooked it up to my phone. A loud clunk almost blew the speakers before “Bossa Nova Baby” filled the room. Olivia sternly turned her head towards me like an owl, mock outraged, and I heard someone say “Who the fuck put this on?”

Then something changed. Olivia’s eyes grew, her lips parted. It was as if she had become genuinely scared, like she’d seen a ghost. She started to say something, then stopped.

That’s when Hana hit her, right in the face, triggering a panic attack, sending her to the floor. Her glasses broke neatly in half, right at the point where she’d glued them together. I could barely process it. How could this be happening again? Lex had run off somewhere and Hana just stood there watching, expressionless, as Olivia lay on the floor, gasping, babbling wildly. I held her hand and called out for help, but nobody seemed to notice. Her glasses lay in halves on the carpet.